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FANTASTIC REALITIES:

SOLID AND VIRTUAL RESONANCE IN MMORPGS

by

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A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of the

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Department of Sociology

2011

This thesis entitled:

Fantastic Realities:
Solid and Virtual Resonance in MMORPGs

Written by Zek Cypress Valkyrie
has been approved for the Department of Sociology

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Fantastic Realities: Solid and Virtual Resonance in MMORPGs

Thesis directed by Professor Joanne Belknap

This dissertation is a qualitative study that examines how game worlds and positive game experiences are neither equally accessible nor equally enjoyable to many who wish to participate in them. Newer research on games argues that those who master them are fulfilled socially, are highly productive, are motivated, and are invigorated by participation in grand narratives. Using a mixed methods approach, I drew on seventy in-depth interviews with gamers coupled with observational data from my membership role in several virtual worlds. Through these data I examined the social barriers deployed to fracture game world communities and arguably disperse the positive benefits of play. Specifically, my participants and my observational data indicate that rigid social categories of gender, sexuality, and race, as well as the assumptions bound to their maintenance and reinforcement, disrupted the possibility for a more inclusive collective identity. I use an interactionist theoretical framework to understand how the rigidity of social categories and identity politics are recreated and enforced through virtual conversation and relationships. This dissertation explains how the labeling and exclusion of various "others" in game worlds, including women, gender-bending men, non-hardcore geeks, fluid sexuality players, and cyberworkers, entrenches the stereotypes of who gamers are and who they can be. The consequences of these practices erode the possibilities for how the solid world and reality itself might benefit from becoming similar to a game.

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Valeria Joan Muse.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my greatest appreciation to the gamers who participated and inhabited the many virtual worlds I spent five years studying. Their insight and passion continued to embolden me throughout the difficulties of this dissertation. I thank them for the healing, the damage mitigation, the adventures, the triumphs, and the heartbreaks. I thank them for their willingness to participate, their reflective responses, and their excitement and interest in this work. May their journeys never end.

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I would like to blame my high school sociology and psychology teacher, Abraham Eisenstein, a.k.a. Mr. X, for his arcane will and (dis)enchanting (dis)ease. There have been many times I have fought with myself over the change caused by Mr. X and whether I should despise him or thank him. He is a testament to the significance a teacher can wield and the importance of knowledge and understanding in life choices. This one teacher made my life more difficult than it would have ever been, and for that, I will always remember and respect him. Wherever he is, I hope he knows that the heart of the spring full moon continues to dream well.

Finally, I would like to thank my grandmother, Valeria Joan Muse. Grandma has been nothing less than a saint my entire life, from buying groceries when my family had no money, to bailing my parents out of jail, to providing me with clothing and school supplies, to just simply alleviating every crisis life could throw our way. As I grew older, she would help me buy video games and consoles. She would drive me to the mall when they were released, or pick them up herself, even at midnight. She quietly supported this hobby-turned-lifelong pursuit without criticism, throughout many years. She made a space for me in her home, paid for school, and pushed me far beyond where I would have stopped without her unconditional love. Although she would never ask for anything, I owe her the world. This is for her.

FANTASTIC REALITIES:
SOLID AND VIRTUAL RESONANCE IN MMORPGS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Reality for many, can be a problem. For decades, gamers have been labeled derisively for attempting to escape reality for something better, something more fulfilling, something that was not reality. The assumption that life was, to borrow the classic Thomas Hobbes quip "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" had arguably overwhelmed gamers and they had willingly chosen to devote hours, days, months, and years of their lives doing anything but, well, life. However, more interesting than gamers themselves is considering why is reality so problematic for so many? Adulthood is often coupled with so called realizations that "life is hard" and "things just don't work out" or "dreams don't always come true." In short, there were clear warnings that reality was coupled with disappointment and this was something most would have to learn to accept. From this perspective, it is no wonder that the prevailing assumption was that gamers had checked out. Why would they stay?

Part of the problem is that *they are not staying*. However, it is not just who used to be considered "gamers" milling around in virtual worlds anymore. The people spending hours of their lives somewhere outside their lives are everywhere. They are high school teachers, housewives and househusbands, the unemployed, military personnel, fathers and mothers, business people, medical students, veterinarians, college undergrads, professors, and children of all ages. I am one of them. If I control for sleep, I have spent almost half of my conscious life during my dissertation research inside virtual worlds. *Half*. A decade ago, I would have had a problem, most likely a disease or disorder that would require I smash my computer into tiny bits,

break all the game software I own, and join some form of addiction program (they still exist). However, this stretches beyond more than some micro pathology tweak and even psychologists will find it difficult to keep this with an epidemic framework. It is *cataclysmic*.

This is no longer a discussion about placing a new stitch in the social tapestry. Rather, gamers are fashioning a whole new quilt sewn together by the fragments of technology in a serendipitous union of graphical advances, connective real-time networking, and virtual ubiquity. It is no longer relevant to discuss people avoiding these technologies or attempting to "disconnect" in favor of "real interactions." It is quite possible that gaming will be the major social avenue in the future. That said, this slice in time is an intriguing social moment, as the possibilities for the future and gaming require a critical analysis of the present. Although the social fabric might be augmented by technology in unforeseeable ways, many existing interactional templates in current virtual worlds illuminate how future interactions might be shaped. This dissertation hopes to inform that future.

This dissertation and the chapters within are a treatise of the current virtual social barriers that exist in game worlds that disrupt the more positive possibilities for gaming technologies to reshape the social future. Those who play in these game worlds shared fun and adventure, bonded in (virtual) life and death situations, connected emotionally and sexually, and found meaning in their virtual lives. In the chapters that follow, I outline how some of the most pervasive and obtuse assumptions about gender, sexuality and race created significant and sometimes impregnable barriers in virtual communities. If the future world will be intimately connected to and through virtual mediums forevermore, this is the social moment in which to reinvent interactional forms that will discard these tired false truths and move forward into a future unwritten.

THE REALITY PROBLEM

I began playing online with the notion that it would free me from reality. My everyday life had been messy and disappointing. The chance to game with other people "like me" I thought, would be the greatest of experiences, a completely "geek world." Perhaps, that ideal only existed in my mind because both the escapism and the solidarity never manifested in the way I imagined. The world inside the game had traded regular human beings for cat-women, elves and the like. It had traded bland everyday life for magicks and sword-and-board brawls. However, the people were still the people. In there and out here, things were disenchantingly similar. (Reflections)[1]

The origins of gaming (electronic games played with a video interface) were built upon some assumption of an escapist narrative (Barton 2008; Chatfield 2010; Fine 2002; Gildorf 2010). Game culture was an exclusively male domain throughout the earlier years, men whose interests may have evolved from the primordial ooze of fantasy literature and tabletop sessions (Chatfield 2010; Fine 2002). Though tracing this history itself and its evolution into gaming is a daunting task (see Barton 2008; Gilsdorf 2010) and one beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is important to recognize that what the broader culture confronted at the conception of the video game era was what many viewed as a socially deficient, possibly defective, group of young men and adolescent boys who became the face of the industry (Chatfield 2010; Ivory 2006). And while it is estimated that the average gamer now is 35-years-old, gaming culture has yet to shed the "cultish" feel of its early days (Chatfield 2010). Chatfield (2010) argues that the broader culture perceived "gaming...like an especially pernicious kind of masturbation: something that turned you in on yourself in the worst possible way" (87). Game culture and the virtual "exodus" (Castronova 2007) have ignited the debate between the resistance embodied in "technopoly"

[1] Reflections are a form of fieldnotes that are discussed in Chapter 3, the methods chapter.

(Postman 1992) discourse, and the "techoptimists" who highlight the social positives of technologies. These elements congeal in the interactional complexities of virtual game worlds and (re)construct the social barriers to a more equitable social reality.

In the beginning, gaming as a media form lacked sophistication, history, and most games appeared juvenile (Chafield 2010). This coupled with the dearth of connective technologies available created what might in the future be considered an anomaly in gaming history (Castronova 2005, 2007; Chatfield 2010; McGonigal 2011; Yee 2009). Games are, after all, social affairs. However, even if gaming appealed to more than these men during this period in history it was beyond the scope of the industry to cultivate social gaming experiences (Chatfield 2010). What gamers were left with were almost three solid decades of games that were constrained by technology (Chatfield 2010). This reality crystallized into the perception that gamers were socially deficient or somehow avoided forging social bonds (Castronova 2005, 2007; Chatfield 2010; McGonigal 2011; Williams and Smith 2007; Yee 2009). Even if they wanted to connect with the thousands of other people who shared their own interests, it was not possible. Social gaming during these years encompassed what were called "Two Player" or "Multiplayer" games, which required additional equipment and geographical proximity (Castronova 2005, 2007; Chatfield 2010; McGonigal 2011; Taylor 2006). Game arcades also saw a brief entry and quiet exit in an attempt to bring gamers together (Chatfield 2010).

The consequence of this lack of connectivity meant most games were created as single player experiences (Chatfield 2010). Games played solo. This sounds counterintuitive at best as even board games, sports, and practically any form of game often requires other players. Solo gaming was an anomaly, and as connective technologies have allowed more players to play *together* (Castronova 2005, 2007; Chatfield 2010; McGonigal 2011; Yee 2009), the demand for

single-player games will likely dissolve into obscurity in the near future. However, what has not dissolved is who the game industry targets in designing and developing games and technologies: reclusive young men and angsty teenage boys (Chatfield 2010; Ivory 2006; Taylor 2006). And now there is a problem. When gaming experiences are being crafted with these stereotypes and assumptions in mind, the products become static and often obtuse representations of what the industry believes "gamers" (read: angsty teenage boys) want.

It could be argued that the games being created have to change because what gamers want and who gamers are has changed (McGonigal 2011; Schwartz 2006; Yee 2009). I fit into a category of gamers sometimes called "extreme" gamers because they often spend more than 45 hours per week playing (McGonigal 2011; Yee 2009). However, the player base has shifted dramatically and gamers are aware of this. McGonigal (2011) argues that women now represent almost half (40%) of all gamers. These demarcation practices at one time had less meaning, but in recent years there has been a sort of casual revolution. Chatfield (2010) refers to this as the "*WoW* Effect" (*World of WarCraft*)[2] or the moment when games realized their potential to incorporate a much, much larger player base, and in return non-gamers realized they could easily become gamers. Some of the "extreme" gamers felt this moment spearheaded by *WoW*'s mass appeal (which they view as casual tripe), the popularity of the *Wii* (viewed as a laughable "family" game console), and "games" on phones (which had previously failed, for example, Nokia's *N-Gage* which released in 2003) was the beginning of the end of the industry (Chatfield 2010; McGonigal 2011; Taylor 2006). However, what it did was close the gap between the gamer stereotype and a potentially infinite player base (Chatfield 2010; Schwartz 2006). Gamers

[2] The Glossary contains an extensive list of the gamer lexicon to assist readers who are unfamiliar with the acronyms, concepts, and terms commonly used to refer to games or elements of games.

could be anyone and anyone could enjoy being a gamer.

Gamers are leaving the solid world[3] for "virtual frontiers" and they are leaving en masse, an "exodus" from reality into synthetic worlds that Castronova (2007) views as potential social cataclysm. This does not mean simply that teenage boys are somehow disappearing into game worlds rather than playing stickball in the street. "Gamer" can now be anybody, and thus it could be possible that anyone might exodus from reality. McGonigal (2011) estimates that there are more than 500 million gamers worldwide and "in the United States alone, there are 183 million active gamers (individuals who, in surveys, report that they play computer or video games 'regularly' on average, thirteen hours a week)" (3). She estimates that gamers spend over three billion hours on games *per week* and that the average person in an active gaming culture (such as the U.S.) will spend ten thousand hours playing games by the time that person reaches the age of 21. Furthermore, the aggregate time of all players who have played *WoW* amounts to almost six million years (McGonigal 2011). Those numbers are nothing short of incredible.

If gaming continues to appeal to more and more people, and game experiences continue to become more immersive, more interesting, and more fun, then it is possible that participation in the solid world may visibly diminish in the future. Indeed, Castronova (2007: 7) argues:

> Time and attention are migrating from the real world into the virtual world. The exodus will strengthen, I believe. Improvements in technology will make virtual worlds into veritable dreamlands. They will be more fun, for more people...in this competition, the real world is going to lose. This loss will put pressure on the real world to adapt...If it is to survive unchallenged, the real world is going to have to offer experiences similar to

[3] "Solid world" refers to the world outside the game. This term eliminates deploying the word "real," since the virtual world is just as "real" as the solid one. "Solid" was a term used by a guild I belonged to for six months.

those available in virtual worlds. In short, the real world will have to become more fun. Castronova (2005) paints a dire and chilling tale of what the end of humanity might be if the mass exodus (from reality to gaming) is fully and uncritically embraced. More specifically, in a distant future, he imagines how artificial intelligence (AI) has taken up all solid world duties and continues to create fun content for humans who are completely immersed in synthetic worlds. The AI even mimics human players in the synthetic worlds as well and gradually life in the solid world diminishes because everyone is too busy having fun in the simulations (Castronova 2005). The last human, an old man, is sitting in that rendered world "under a tree on the slope of a grassy hill, sunshine flickering through the leaves, a soft wind blowing in his flowing white beard" (282). His health in the solid world fails while in that moment he "closes his virtual eyes, takes his last breath, and is no more" (282). Then, there was nothing left except the AI.

Rin: Daughters of Mnemosyne an anime, licensed for release in the United States in 2009, centers on the lives of several immortal women and highlights a possible future where people are using the virtual world to escape indefinitely. They are passed out and "logged on" in bars, homes, and on the streets. They have disconnected from the solid world and are referred to as "1.5ers" in that they live somewhere between the real world (1.0) and the virtual one (2.0). McGonigal (2011) uses the imagery from Herodotus's story of Lydia to relate how games could serve a positive social function. In the story, the people are stricken by a terrible famine that lasts for years. However, when the people play dice they enjoy themselves so much they are able to forget about their hunger. Because of this, they decide to play for two days and then eat on the third day and repeat the cycle for survival. This never truly solves the problem of the famine, but allows the people to live for years before many of them migrate (McGonigal 2011). Regrettably, the exodus into virtual worlds is more akin to the people never stopping to eat on the third day

and starving to death because they just simply enjoy playing dice so much more than eating. And that is a potential problem of virtual worlds and games. The dice *are* more fun, the exhaustive synthetic world Castronova describes is more fun, the virtual world 2.0 is also more fun (at least for the 1.5ers). Gamers know this: reality is the problem.

TECHNOPOLY

Turkle (2011) discusses how "cyborgs" (people who, in 1996, were carrying computer and radio transmitters, digital displays clipped to their eyeglasses and were always connected to the internet) rose to embrace technology without fear. They reasoned that technology "was 'just a tool' for being better prepared and organized in an increasingly complex information environment" (151). It could be argued that this has become the new world order: what people lack as human beings, they expect technology will provide (Turkle 2011). Although this moment in time is burgeoning with "game changers" in the realm of technology such as computers, internet, simulations, social networking, and smart phones, history is robust with examples of how technology displaced and replaced realities of the known world.

Postman (1992: 28) describes how technological innovations were carefully controlled and confronted by tradition throughout history:

> Everything must give way, in some degree, to their development. The social and symbolic worlds become increasingly subject to the requirement of that development. Tools are not integrated into the culture; they attack the culture. They bid to *become* the culture. As a consequence, tradition, social mores, myth, politics, ritual, and religion have to fight for their lives.

Postman (1992) discusses the sanctions placed on the Samurai katana (tied to honor) and the iron

crossbow ("hateful to God") as examples of how authorities attempt to control the change wrought by tool (technological) innovations as they are perceived to (and may genuinely) threaten to displace the social (and moral) order. Similarly, technology that conceded the discovery of the Earth not being center stage of the universe, but instead in some nebulous corner of insignificance, unraveled the Western religious sense of being "special to God" (Postman 1992: 29). Postman (1992) marshals that technology changes how society is done and resistance to that change, and fear of that change, casts one as a luddite. Luddites symbolically represent "people trying desperately to preserve whatever rights, privileges, laws, and customs had given them justice in the older world-view" (Postman 1992: 43). It is not the technology itself, then, but how it changes the culture that demands the resistance.

During the industrialization era, technology began to subjugate the traditional world. Innovation was done merely if it could be done, with little regard as to why it should be done (Postman 1992: 42). A number of congealing cultural factors including distrust for constraints, capitalism disconnecting the past and the future, technological alternatives to traditional beliefs, and the loss of confidence in those beliefs birthed the technopoly, which Postman (1992: 52) describes as "the submission of all forms of cultural life to the sovereignty of technique and technology." In other words, if everything once believed had been undermined by technology, then technology would be the answer or could provide the answer to anything.

This sentiment has been emboldened by the power of the internet in recent years. As Coupland (2011: 160) explains: "The internet has made me very casual, with a level of omniscience that was unthinkable a decade ago. I now wonder if God gets bored knowing the answer to everything." From this viewpoint, technology provides the answers to everything. However, what is known and what can be known has become so robust that it escapes any

categorical and digestible significance, so that everything is relative.

> But my knowledge is now more fragile. For every accepted piece of knowledge I find, there is, within easy reach, someone who challenges the fact. Every fact has its antifact. The Internet's extreme hyperlinking highlights those antifacts as brightly as the facts...You can't rely on experts to sort them out, because for every expert there is an equal and countervailing antiexpert. Thus anything I learn is subject to erosion by these ubiquitous antifactors. My certainty about *anything* has decreased (Kelly 2011:19).

This, Postman (1992) argues, is how a technopoly operates: reduction of certainty in knowledge guarantees the only constant that remains is technology. There is no grand design based on metaphysical or theological assumptions because everything is questioned and therefore anything could be true (Postman 1992: 59). Knowledge is now fluidity or "liquidity" and no longer fixed, dictated by authorities and experts in static forms such as textbooks (Kelly 2011: 19). In knowing everything, nothing seems certain.

Because of this many are forced to forge their own truths and their own form of certainty and though they participate in a global network, they are alone in their own reality:

> We are alone but receive the signals that tell us we are together. Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone. And there is a risk that we come to see others as objects to be accessed - and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing (Turkle 2011:154).

People expect less from each other because technology has provided them with everything. Social interactions have become a jumbled mess and any concept of "undivided attention" (a phrase I used to hear years ago) has dispersed. In an era of virtual ubiquity, people are always logged in, always accessible, and at the same time they are in a sense, nowhere: "they could be

with you, but they were always somewhere else as well" (Turkle 2011: 152).

The fear is that this could become the standard for social interaction where the concept of holding a conversation with one person, in person, would be extinct (Turkle 2011). Why have only one conversation when people could have many and through different venues? Once normalized, no one may care if they are better or worse at social multitasking anymore (Jackson 2008). Many gamers are already used to this. Virtual worlds by default allow for multiple levels of text to be exchanged to different audiences. A player can simultaneously shout to an entire zone full of players, talk to a guild about how grinding XP (experience points) is boring, and have cybersex with a romantic interest in private chat, while waiting for a dragon to spawn in a party where the group is excitedly discussing the likelihood a rare item will drop from the mob. The game industry and gamers themselves have realized that gaming is a lifelong pursuit, many never intend to quit, and many acknowledge that gaming and technology will always be a part of their lives (McGonigal 2011; Taylor 2006). Attention divided, expectations diminished, and hyper-connectivity in an isolated state are realities of the future in a technopoly (Postman 1992; Turkle 1995, 2011).

TECHOPTIMISM

Despite the realities of connective isolation and decreased certainty of knowledge, gamers are gaining *something* with the time they dedicate to play. McGonigal (2011) urges gamers (and by extension non-gamers) to consider that their extensive time in game worlds has made them all maestros, and that mulling over "wasted time," commonly known as "gamer regret," should no longer paralyze their pursuits. The brand of thinking that continues to promote "real life" as more worthy and morally sound than anything "virtual" is a regrettably narrow

minded and incredibly shortsighted approach to this era of virtual ubiquity (see Caplan, Williams, and Yee 2009; Chuang 2006; Hsu, Wen, and Wu 2009; Peters and Malesky 2008; Symth 2007; Young 2004). It could be argued that the shaming practices of these moral entrepreneurs are tired and obtuse as deterrence justifications, and as such, will not reduce the enjoyment the virtual world provides. Furthermore, shaming may only exacerbate the desire for exodus (Castronova 2007; McGonigal 2011; Yee 2009). It is far more appropriate to consider what gamers are learning, as it may provide the insight required to imbue reality with fun, a consideration addressed in the dissertation work.

McGonigal (2011) and Taylor (2006) argue that gamers become immersed in forging deep social bonds in virtual worlds. Despite the assumption that gamers are socially deficient, another reality is that gaming requires trust and cooperation to accomplish goals (McGonigal 2011; Taylor 2006; Yee 2009). More specifically, gamers learn to play with other gamers, balance their parties, and work in tandem to accomplish tasks. These bonds are deeply meaningful and gamers often lament over friends who have left the game or find it difficult themselves to leave because their friends still play (Chatfield 2010; McGonigal 2011; Taylor 2006; Yee 2009).

Additionally, many gamers enjoy working hard (McGonigal 2011; Taylor 2006; Yee 2006, 2009). Moreover, any game can be considered an "unnecessary obstacle," which is to argue games are work that is both voluntary and enjoyable (McGonigal 2011; Yee 2006). Finally, games provide a clear understanding of progress through "feedback systems" that allow players to feel as though their work in the game is recognized and rewarded (Castronova 2005; McGonigal 2011; Taylor 2006). In sum, gaming is much more than wasted time in a networked and isolated state or as Chatfield (2010: 97) states:

> Gaming life is, in its way, thick with obligations, judgments and allegiances - and this is the way people like it. What they crave is not so much an escape from or avoidance of the commitments that make for 'real' friendships and worldly achievements as the opportunity to conjure virtual versions of the same class of satisfaction.

However, gamers continue to seek more of this satisfaction through games. McGonigal (2011: 24) discusses the psychological concept of "flow" (more casually dubbed being "in the zone") which for gamers is the state of playing at their maximum ability without winning or quitting. This sense of extreme motivation and productivity imbued with fun creates an intense experience for gamers which "requires" more games to be played (McGonigal 2011; Taylor 2006; Yee 2009).

This intensity is often pathologized and problematized and likened to everything from gambling, to drug addiction, to sex (Morris 2011; Symth 2007; Yee 2009; Young 2004). These assumptions are often supported by caricatures of gamers' lives in media. The anime *Welcome to the NHK*, licensed for release in the United States in 2007, parodies the life of Sato, a "hikikomori" (loosely translated as "shut-in"), who, in his darkest hour, cut-off financially from his parents, out of school and unemployed, and at a loss in love and life in general, begins playing "Ultimate Fantasy Online." Sato, with no job or social life, quickly plummets into the virtual world. He plays without much sleep or food for weeks, unshaven, without bathing, while chasing the dream of making money in the virtual world to help him pay his rent and growing debt. He comes to idealize the virtual world, touting that it offers "true friendship" and has everything the real world lacks. However, Sato suffers what seems to be an inevitable disenchantment. Virtual coin is not so easily profitable, and his in-game companion, a female avatar he has been falling in love with is actually his next door neighbor Yamazaki. Yamazaki

took it upon himself to show Sato that the virtual world is an illusion, and that a life of playing online will leave him fat, balding, and living with his parents.

The story in *Welcome to the NHK* demonstrates in spectacular form most of the negative bias and scathing parody that gaming endures in the media. Arguably, what this perspective fails to realize is that assuming reality does and must continue to feel mundane, disregards what is missing from reality that could allow for greater meanings and more intense experiences similar to those in games. More often, gamers are looking to "infinite games" to provide these immersive experiences (McGonigal 2011). MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) are one such genre of infinite games. The MMORPG worlds are ever-changing, new milestones can be added in patches and updates, new players join these worlds and allow for more social bonds to emerge and the games never truly "end." Thus, the gaming experience of being productive and engaged can be prolonged for years (Castronova 2005, 2007; McGonigal 2011; Taylor 2006; Yee 2006, 2009).

Furthermore, Castronova (2005, 2007), McGonigal (2011), and Taylor (2006) argue that gamers have high hopes of game success and become deeply connected with games because they can participate in epic narratives. In essence, players see their game lives as having meaning and that the fate of their world itself can depend on their actions (McGonigal 2011; Taylor 2006; Yee 2009). Game play in this way can be considered the opposite of depression because it is active, motivated, and engaged (McGonigal 2011). Tackling unnecessary obstacles (voluntarily) makes people happy (McGonigal 2011). People may not feel the same way about work in the solid world, they feel forced to do that type of work, someone is making them, they could fail to accomplish it and be punished, and they feel they have no control over whether they want to do it or not (McGonigal 2011; Yee 2006). Gaming is a different kind of work imbued with meaning

that quite literally can change the fate of the world (McGonigal 2011; Taylor 2006; Yee 2006).

For example, when I proceed into the forests near Gridania, an area in *FFXIV* (*Final Fantasy XIV*), to practice my conjury and thaumaturgy (my class skills that are both forms of "magic") I have in mind my participation in the imminent war with the Garlean Empire (the soon-to-be invaders of my homeland). My repetitive training and battling the mobs of the forest will, someday, mean that I can help fight the Empire in a struggle that will change the fate of the world. My progress is very visible to me: I gain ranks and levels, I exchange my old equipment for new robes, pointy hats, and gemmed staves. I learn new skills to better assist my allies and down my enemies. In contrast, solid world work is more difficult, at least for me (and arguably for other gamers and other people in general) to enjoy. More specifically, this dissertation will not save the world from the Empire, my writing and thinking skills will not level up in any visible way, and this work could end in epic failure. However, gamers know their work will lead to visible markers of progress and possibly "epic wins" or moments in which the outcomes are so exciting they are fully engaged and stunned over their success (McGonigal 2011). This is not to argue that the solid world is barren of these "epic wins," but that games are built specifically to provide players with as many of these experiences as possible (McGonigal 2011), and the solid world fails to compare (Castronova 2007).

Gamers are arguably optimistic, empowered, autonomous, and social persons who wish to be engaged in grand narratives that will allow them to be incredibly productive while having fun (Castronova 2007; McGonigal 2011; Yee 2009). They seem to negotiate knowledge fluidity through feedback systems and isolation through deep social bonds. Although the "techoptimists" rely on some essentialist assumptions of human happiness, the argument that games can teach social engineers how to make reality more sacred and less profane demands that games not be

dismissed as "just play" (Vandenberg 1998). Games are reshaping the social and emotional landscape (Myers 2007), allowing players to present themselves through avatars (Meadows 2008), engage in "cyberwork" (Castronova 2005; Dibbell 2006; Heeks 2008), and experience "epic wins" (McGonigal 2011; Taylor 2006). Because of this, many gamers are finding the solid world less satisfying than virtual worlds, which suggests virtual worlds hold promise for rewriting solid world realities. If the solid world is to be saved from dramatically suffering from the "exodus to the virtual world" (Castronova 2007), "gameful" (McGonigal 2011) experiences could be forged to create *lifelong players of life*. In short, reality itself could benefit mightily from becoming a game.

OVERVIEW

An initial and preemptive move to making life into a game is to ensure that positive game experiences are equally accessible to any who wish to participate. Although the techoptimists focus on the positives of gaming, they somewhat ignore that virtual world game experiences that include hopes of success, social bonds, and epic meaning are contingent upon the rigid enforcement of social categories and identity politics. That is, the positives of gaming are not always accessible to everybody. This dissertation critically examines these barriers in order to identify the social politics involved in eroding positive game experiences for many players and thus diluting any attempt to convert and transpose game mechanics onto solid world realities.

In Chapter Two, I highlight my own temporal and theoretical framework, focusing on interactionism as the crux for maintaining social categories and the problematic assumptions attached to them. It is important to acknowledge the perspective of my approach as well as the particular time and space in which this research was conducted. I paint a portrait of virtual

worlds in their current state, the ones in which I was involved, and discuss the approaches to play to which the gamers in virtual world adhere. I discuss the concept of "world resonance" and how it framed the identity politics of virtual worlds.

In Chapter Three, the methods chapter, I discuss how I conducted this qualitative and multi-methods study. The qualitative data in this dissertation relies on both gaming (online) observation data and in-depth interviews with 70 gamers. I detail the time spent in my research setting and how it allowed me to build rapport with my participants. I also highlight how I collected, recorded, and protected my data to ensure that my informants' solid and virtual lives remained confidential.

Chapter Four through Eight are the findings chapters. In Chapter Four, I explain how cautionary tales of "gender fakers" keep men from trusting other men as well as from trusting women. Most het-identified men online are acutely aware that they can engage with other men romantically, but in order to maintain the homophobic posturing of modern masculinity, they force players who claim to be women to "prove" that they are so. This preemptive move serves to maintain their gender and sexuality identity. Censorship can be quick and harsh: Players who fail to prove themselves as women to such questioning men are outcast, harassed, and sometimes forced to leave the server or the game itself.

In Chapter Five, I discuss how women gamers who prove themselves to be women are treated as "exceptional" in virtual worlds. Arguably, their experiences as gamers varies from the experiences of men and they often have to negotiate their in-game success with overt romantic and sexual harassment. This reality largely spoils their ability to enjoy the virtual world and continues to inhibit their acceptance as "true gamers." This also points to the dashing hopes that virtual/fantasy worlds are more gender equal.

In Chapter Six, I analyze how geek men, emboldened by the gamer stereotype and the visibility of virtual progress reformulate hegemonic masculinity in virtual worlds. I discuss the emergence of "epeen" a form of ideal geek masculinity that demands dedication to the game world and casts many players as failures or forces them to engage in cheats (e.g., botting or goldbuying). This geek masculinity embodies many exclusionary practices that fracture virtual worlds with sexualized and homophobic insults, brews hostility, and ratchets the competition between players.

In Chapter Seven, I analyze cybersex in game worlds. I explain how cybersex is broadened by the addition of virtual bodies and gestures that allow for a range of sexual relationships. However, I report how cybersex is restrained by issues of internet predation, gendered desired and sexual space. Indeed, the players denounce the potential of cybersex, labeling it a distraction that should be disallowed from game worlds and an inferior sexual expression as a whole.

Chapter Eight examines the stereotype of the "goldfarmer" and the players' processes for identifying them in the virtual world. Players make radical and arbitrary assumptions in labeling goldfarmers, and thereby assume race. Once accusations are made, players proceed to torture, harass, and PK (Player Kill) assumed goldfarmers because they are deemed "harmful" to the game economy. While some players sympathize with the solid world realities of goldfarmers, many expend great effort in ousting them from the virtual world.

Chapter Nine, the final chapter, summarizes the previous chapters and reports how together the findings inhibit the positives of game experiences to be harnessed on a broader scale and transposed onto the solid world. I highlight the limitations of the current study and outline areas of investigation for future research. Additionally, I identify and explain a few possible

consequences of a future of hyper-resonance and virtual ubiquity. Lastly, I discuss my own contributions and explain how life could operate as a game.

CHAPTER 2

TEMPORAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The advent of the MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) era began in 1997 with the launch of *Ultima Online* (*UO*) (Dibbell 2006). Dozens of MMORPGs have been released over the past decade, which have broadened their appeal to larger audiences than ever before. The zenith of their popularity has been spearheaded over the last few years by *World of WorldCraft* (*WoW*) which was released in 2004, and currently boasts more than 12 million subscribers and more than half the MMORPG subscription market (McGonigal 2011). MMORPGs have permeated the media both in parody and curiosity. Popular television shows such as *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, *Numbers,* and *Big Bang Theory* have broadcasted parodies of MMORPG players' lifestyles. Newspaper and blog articles debate the motivations of the people who own the 12 million accounts for *WoW*. Anti-internet banter has surfaced blaming MMORPGs for numerous social ills including lost jobs, infidelity, and reduced school performance (see Caplan, Williams, and Yee 2009; Chuang 2006; Hsu, Wen, and Wu 2009; Peters and Malesky 2008; Smith 2008; Symth 2007; Young 2004). "Machinima" has also become a popular venue for MMORPG players to express their feelings, distaste, and personalities to other players and non-players alike.

The burgeoning interest in MMORPGs in popular culture has begun to spark scholarly exploration. Unfortunately, these investigations remain shortsighted and centered upon the "obvious dangers" of gaming (see Castronova 2007 and Williams and Smith 2007 for a critique of previous literature on gaming). However, this remains an important social moment and research on virtual game worlds that escapes the practices of pathology of the rhetoric deployed

by moral entrepreneurs may well serve to carve future templates for these new social tapestries to be woven. This dissertation hopes to be part of that effort in that it details the current social and technological moment of virtual world gaming as well as aims to create a *language of resonance* for thinking theoretically about the synergy between the solid and virtual world as they relate to social realities.

PORTRAIT OF THE MOMENT

In a broader sense, one of the more interesting aspects of MMORPGs and virtual gaming in general is the potential for these games to appeal to larger audience, indeed, to everyone. The future will almost certainly incorporate virtual "realities" into everyday routine. This can be seen in console gaming as well that has made dramatic strides in online play by incorporating gaming, friend chat, single and multiplayer aspects, and Second Life carbon copies into an aggregate experience. It is not that the solid and virtual will continue to be compared and contrasted, but inevitably synthesized into a compound reality. (From author's field notes)[4]

Social categories such as gender, sexuality, and race are dynamic and fluid, as well as contingent upon temporal and spatial location (Berger and Luckman 1967; Seidman 2003). Claims to novel categories begin a process of collective identity formation in order to create the necessary political currency to promote social recognition, and arguably empowerment (Gamson 1995; Jeffreys 1996; Katz 1990). Social constructionists call attention to phenomena as situated in culture and history in an effort to glean the meanings of said phenomena in that sphere (Berger and Luckman 1967; Seidman 2003). This perspective questions the ubiquity of social categories

[4] The author's fieldnotes exemplars are pulled from one of three fieldnotes files: empirical, analytical, or epistemological. These files are discussed in Chapter 3, the methods chapter.

which often buttresses essentialist arguments and assumptions about social life (Berger and Luckman 1967; Seidman 2003). Although constructionism is more of an epistemological position than an explanatory theory, my dissertation challenges players' assumptions of the universality of social categories and their attempts to apply and reconstruct the same meanings of the solid world onto the virtual world (Berger and Luckman 1967; Gamson 1995; Jeffreys 1996; Katz 1990; Seidman 2003). However, the constructionist perspective also allows me to highlight my own spatial and temporal locations as they undoubtedly augment my thinking and experiences (as well as those of the gamers in these worlds).

The animated film, *Summer Wars*, licensed for release in the United States in 2011, crafts a story of a virtual paradise called "Oz" where over one billion users are immersed in an enormous simulated world. Oz is accessible through any electronic medium, phones, computers, televisions, and game systems all allow players to log in and participate. Oz is an exhaustive simulation that allows players to dress their avatars, experience an interactive cybermall (shop for their avatars or themselves), and play various games, including simulated sports. Many businesses are located in Oz and conduct their meetings there while their employees work at virtual desks, and even international politics are conducted through Oz. All languages are universally translated allowing every player to interact with anyone (and likely eroding all need for anyone to study language, a time where learning one language would be all one ever needs to do).

This universality depicted in the world of Oz has not yet occurred in the virtual worlds of today. At the time of this research, virtual worlds are fragmented into separate spaces, different companies compete for players, and virtual worlds are governed by different rules (Castronova 2007). This is important because it highlights that my discussion of virtual worlds should not be

over generalized and assumed to incorporate the experiences of all virtual worlds. For example, while Blizzard, the company responsible for *WoW* (*World of WarCraft*), has been the most successful MMORPG to date, many more games in the genre will release this year and likely more will in the near future. This means that virtual world gaming is not currently interconnected in the same way as the simulation world Oz.

Additionally, if each game is considered to have created one unique virtual world (in that Eorzea in *FFXIV* [*Final Fantasy XIV*] is different from Azeroth in *WoW*), then the world of each game has been cloned to create "servers"[5] or "realms." This means there are multiple copies of Azeroth as well as other virtual worlds, which means even if players are playing the same game, they may choose to participate on different servers (which for some games may change their experiences). *WoW* is quite exceptional in that it offers a few server options or "types" (largely because of its popularity), which include PvP dedicated servers (players can fight other players from opposing factions in the open world), PvE servers (players can only engage in PvP play in dedicated areas such as battlegrounds), and RP servers of the previous two types (servers with an emphasis on role play and the creation of character narratives). However, *FFXIV* sets no controls or guidelines for players to follow in terms of server choice as every server is exactly the same. Any attempt to formulate a server identity such as the "RP server" is up to the players to organize and relate to the virtual community. This means it is possible for one server to have a different feel and create a different experience than another (although the magnitude of this difference is debatable).

Notably, this also means that servers that are seen as deviating from the standard game experience are labeled exceptional spaces. While exceptional spaces can be politically relevant

[5] Virtual world games divide players into servers due to technical restrictions, see the Glossary.

for destabilizing standardized categories, they also tend to be reified as "other" spaces (Gamson 1995; Jeffreys 1996). In being exceptional and unique, these spaces can do a disservice to the broader political struggle as they provide sanctuary and escape from oppression but do not actively engage in decentralizing the practices that buttress this form of marginalization (Gamson 1995; Jeffreys 1996; Katz 1990). So while it is valid to make claims that "different" game experiences exist than the ones discussed in the following chapters, it is equally valid to recognize those experiences as exceptional and question whether the space allowed for them away from other players, and other worlds, does little more than isolate those experiences in obscurity. That said, I have participated in several servers in dozens of virtual worlds. For the MMORPGs I discuss in more depth, I grinded characters to level caps on two servers in *FFXI*, three servers in *WoW* (one was PvP, two PvE), and one server in *FFXIV* (the time spent on this alone has exceeded 500 days). Although these accomplishments will continue to be undermined in terms of the games evolving and adding content, the social landscape discussed in the following chapters should continue to be relevant to understanding the interactional complexities of virtual worlds.

Barring hardware barriers and inadequacies, accessing a virtual world is incredibly simple. For example, at this moment I can purchase a copy of *FFXIV* from a retailer or online store (other games are simply downloaded directly to the computer and some are even F2P [free to play]) and begin my entry in the virtual world. I can install the game and create my account which will allow me to create my character. After my account information is squared away (credit card entry, email verification, and so on) I can launch the game, enter my account and password, and click the big, red "Play" button. The game opens, I click "start," and I am greeted with the following message: "Exploring Eorzea is a thrilling experience. During your time here,

you will be able to talk, join, and adventure with many other individuals in an experience that is unique to online games. That being said, we have no desire to see your real life suffer as a consequence. Please do not forget your family, your friends, your school, or your work. Do you wish to continue?" Apparently, the game is so good I might not come back to the solid world. Choosing to proceed, I am asked to create my character. I am given five fantasy race options: Hyur (human-looking characters), Elezen (tall, slender elves), Lalafell (short, cute humanoids), Miqo'te (cat-women), and Roegadyn (big, bulky men). I choose Lalafell because they are cute and the text describing their race says they are well suited for making friends with all races. Next, I am given the option of two "clans" of Lalafell: dunesfolk and plainsfolk. I choose dunesfolk because the text states they place the advancement of knowledge above all else and are known for being scholars (it seems to fit).

Next I must choose between the male and female options. I decide to be gender consistent and choose male. Yee (2009) argues that given a hypothetical sample of 1000 players, 840 would be men and 160 would be women. Among the men, 647 (77.0%) of them would chose to play a male character and 193 (23%) would chose to play a female character (that is, men gender-bend rather often). However, among the women 155 (96.9%) would choose to play a female character and only 5 (3.1%) would play a male character. As I will argue in Chapters Four and Five, women gamers are remarkably more gender consistent, and men gamers, knowing that a large number of other gaming men choose female characters, are sometimes cautious in their romantic and sexual pursuits.

Having selected my Lalafell, I am now able to augment his appearance. I am given several options including height, voice, skin tone, hair styles and colors (and hair highlights as well), eyebrows, eye shape, eye size, and eye color, nose, mouth, ears, and a few customization

options exclusive to the clan. Satisfied with my selections, I am prompted to choose a discipline (or class). I decide shooting arrows sounds fun so I select "Archer." Next I select a date of birth and guardian deity for my new character. I now have to choose a "world" (server) on which to play, as well as a name for my character. I name him "Dissertation Avatar" and select to start in the forest city of Gridania. With a final click, I am launched into the world. I am treated to a story scene that shows my character walking through the forest. Seeing a downed airship, he rushes off to the crash site.

Thus, my journey begins. I am immediately confronted by a pack of wolves, chased by a giant treant (tree monster), and eventually find my way to Gridania. Here, I can begin questing and bumping into other players. I could ask other players if they could show me around the city, or tell me where I can get stronger arrows, or if anyone is looking for a new player to join their linkshell (guild). I could walk outside the city gates and do battle with the creatures there (critters called Star Marmots are just beyond the gate), attempting to level-up my archery skills, and thus my ability to challenge even greater mobs. I could walk into the market stalls (an area to purchase goods) and buy new tools to begin crafting items such as new garbs to wear (weaving and leatherworking are options), or a new bow to strengthen my character (the carpentry guild happens to be located in the city). Alternatively, I could grab a hatchet and go into the forest to chop wood and gather materials and goods to sell to other players or utilize for my crafts. If I have a sense for adventure, I could run out the city gate and simply walk somewhere deep in the forest, attempting to avoid being killed by mobs far above my level. I could also do none of these things, find another player, sit down, and chat the night away discussing why I am online avoiding my dissertation. The possibilities can feel, and in many ways are, endless. And the time spent mastering these game worlds is truly epic.

THEORETICAL FOCUS

Blumer (1969) argues there is more to human behavior than influences by outside forces or uncontrollable psychological factors, both of which ignore the importance of meaning and the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman 1967; Ritzer 1992, 1996). Blumer (1969) disagreed with sociological theories that believe large-scale, external forces determine individual action. He explained, "Structural features, such as 'culture,' 'social systems,' 'social stratification,' or 'social roles,' set conditions for [human] action but do not determine [human] action" (Blumer 1969: 87-88). People act towards situations that are shaped by structural features like culture and collective identities (Blumer 1969; Gamson 1995). I positioned myself through an interactionist lens partly because this perspective buttresses assumptions of human agency (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Johnson 1997). Since interactionism does not entirely support the premise that structural features determine human action, there is latitude for people (or in this case players) to resist structure or formulate new identities, behaviors, and so on. Arguably, it views society as a game with rules about how to play, but does not marshal that all who participate will be constrained by those rules or that they will always take "paths of least resistance" (Johnson 1997).

Although interactionists' focus on meaning and micro-level interactions may allow more damaging institutional practices to escape unnoticed and unchallenged (Gamson 1995; Stryker 1987) (such as the persistent reality that the game industry continues to produce games for angsty teenage boys), a honed critique of such practices is beyond the scope of this work (Gamson 1995; Stryker 1987). Rather, my focus accepts the terms dictated by game creators (structural features) and seeks to analyze how players proceed to function within those limitations (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Mead 1962), and in turn, how their interactional

practices (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Wharton 2008) constrain both a broadened and more inclusive "gamer" collective identity, as well as resisted more fluid social categories in respect to gender, sexuality, and race within virtual worlds. Interactionism was also conducive with my membership role (Adler and Adler 1987) in that Blumer (1969: 86) argues "To try to catch the interpretative process by remaining aloof....and refusing to take the role of the acting unit is to risk the worst kind of subjectivism...[missing] the process as it occurs in the experience of the acting unit which uses it."

By extension, this dissertation adheres to the premises of interactionism in that interactions between players are based on shared meanings, reinforced through those interactions, and are understood through interpretive processes (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Mead 1962). Littlejohn (1992: 190-191) argues: "People communicate to interpret events and to share those with others. For this reason it is believed that reality is constructed socially as a product of communication...our meanings and understandings arise from our communication with others." Because of this, I focus on how players use talk and communication to create, reinforce, and then enforce the same interactional rituals that maintain the status quo (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Mead 1962; Ridgeway 1997; Riseman 1998) thus affirming their social realities in virtual spaces.

For example, in Chapter 4 I discuss how players' collective understanding that "gender fakers" have duped other players in the past allows current players to share stories about gender fakers as a way of persevering men's heterosexual identities, reinforcing homophobia, and bracketing other players into rigid gender and sexuality binaries. Arguably, the players desire (or require) knowledge of social categories in order to smoothen interactions, allow participants in those interactions to orient themselves to the process through (gender) expectations, and in the

same manner crystallize and affirm existing stereotypes through interactional similarity and reinforced expectations (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Mead 1962; Ridgeway 1997; Riseman 1998; Wharton 2008). In sum, MMORPG experiences are governed by and accessed through conversation and social interaction, and arguably, those interactions with players dictate how the game will be played, what the experiences of play will resemble, and the enjoyment of those experiences.

Gamson (1995) argues that the identity politics of social movements seeking political recognition are caught between carving a collective identity and deconstructing the socially produced binaries that are the basis of oppression. In other words, there exists an ethnic or essentialist politic that requires clear categories of collective identity for resistance and political gain (Gamson 1995: 391). In contrast, is a deconstructionist politic that holds such categories in contempt of a more fluid and unstable reality, which could deflect social control (Gamson 1995: 391). The latter has been embodied in queer politics (Gamson 1995; Seidman 1996), which one could argue opposes society itself (or at least the rigidity of social categories that are blamed for enabling oppressive practices). This politic is similar to the ideology of the technopoly (Postman 1992) as well as constructionism (Berger and Luckman 1967; Seidman 2003), in that it merits persistent blurring of social categories and reduction of true form until everything becomes relative. In this state, categories no longer oppress groups, but conversely groups do not so much exist, in that their collective identity has eroded (Gamson 1995).

A resolution between the two competing politics seems improbable, and it may be beyond this moment that such a resolution exists (Gamson 1995). However, this dissertation is guided through a similar lens: presented with opportunities to blur categories beyond recognition in their virtual interactions and forge a virtual paradise that everyone could enjoy, players instead

recreate and reinforce persistent assumptions about gender, sexuality, and race transposing them upon virtual worlds and diminishing the potential of an inclusive paradise. More aptly, players use these assumptions to create hierarchies within what could be a novel and greatly inclusive collective identity, that of "gamers." The evidence for interactional resistance, is minimal.

Gamers as a social category, as they now exist, have instead created a rigid collective identity that seeks to label "non-gamers" and disqualify them from being embraced by the virtual world. In other words, although gamers are acutely aware of the potential for the identity to be applicable to anyone, many gamers feel this erodes their collective identity, which for decades has endured media scrutiny and social exclusion (Chatfield 2010). In essence, gamers are experiencing a moment of political recognition (one that will likely continue to increase), but the player base has rapidly expanded, threatening the identity itself (Gamson 1995; Jeffreys 1996). Thus, the exclusion practices and harassment of "others" in the virtual world. These harassed others include gender-bending men, most women, non-hardcore geeks, fluid sexuality players, and cyberworkers. And this exclusion occurs arguably in the defense of the current gamer collective identity; reinforcing existing gender, sexuality, and race norms.

WORLD RESONANCE

Players' adherence to and interactional enforcement of rigid social categories can be understood on a continuum of what I call "world resonance." World resonance is quite simply the "slippage" between the solid world and the virtual world. World resonance seems related to how a player negotiates and controls information about their solid world social categories within the virtual world. Higher resonance or hyper-resonance ("hypers" for short), marshal greater consistency between their solid-to-virtual identities as the ideal form of play. Lower resonance or

world dampeners ("damps" for short) attempt to maintain the separation between the virtual and solid (part of the escapist narrative). Arguably, this "language of resonance" allows for a richer theoretical understanding of the multi-world experiences of technology in and outside the gaming sphere.

Hypers are more concerned with transparency and argue that knowing players' social categories is in the interests of interactional smoothness, alleviates the possibility of "fakers" of any variety, and is simply more authentic, while resistance to disclosure is treated with suspicion (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Mead 1962; Ridgeway 1997; Riseman 1998; Wharton 2008). Damps adhere more to a separatist and escapist form of play believing the virtual world offers opportunities to extend beyond rigid solid world categories, experiment with personal narratives, and perform their virtual lives as separate (and possibly different) than their solid world lives (Gamson 1995; Jeffreys 1996; Katz 1990; Seidman 1996). For example, in respect to gender, hypers would believe in authenticity and consistency, no experimentation, and the more rigid form of playing online, but also the more "honest" form. In contrast, damps would encourage exploration, blurred gender categories, and creative narratives. These are the ideal types at the extremes of the continuum. Although role-playing is part-and-parcel of the MMORPGs experience (they are Massively Multiplayer Online *Role Playing* Games), many players adhere to the hyper-resonance standard, that is, one should be who they "really" are in respect to social categories, yet the exceptional realities of the virtual world, meaning the fantasy context that allows for spell-casting and monster-slaying, is permissible.

Some players can also be considered to uphold another approach that juggles the fantasy worlds with the realities of online play with a reverberated resonance ("reverbs" for short). Reverbs may engage in creative play and persona construction, however, some game mechanics

may force higher resonance interactions. For example, though players may adhere to separation of worlds and lack disclosure of their solid world social categories, they may also run dungeons on voice chat, which renders many attempts to keep the two worlds distinct rather ineffective. Reverbs may not force interactional disclosure, but recognize social categories as meaningful and a possibly inescapable part of the process of play. However, the challenges of reverbs are an indicator of the future of gaming worlds as moving toward a hyper-resonant reality. Since my argument marshals that virtual ubiquity will continue to sew the worlds together, I am claiming the future will be one of hyper-resonance. Technological progress alone has buttressed this inevitability, and it is only exacerbated by the interactional demands of current hypers. In doing so, gaming becomes a more connected experience and gamers' lives become increasingly transparent: Gamers' and arguably many non-gamers will no longer move between worlds, but oscillate seamlessly in a connected nexus. One likely consequence is that escape and persona recreation will become difficult in a hyper-resonant reality, leaving damps to search for alternative forums of performative identity expression (Goffman 1959, 1963) that the internet was once hailed for allowing (Chiou 2006; McKenna, Green and Smith 2001; Kendall 2000, 2002; Mustanski 2001; Rheingold 2000; Turkle 1995, 1999).

The following chapters detail how hypers deploy a number of justifications for the reification of social categories in virtual worlds, which in turn serves to divide the player base into ideal players and "others." In doing so, the potential for solidarity among a new inclusive social category of "gamer" is largely undermined and fractures the virtual community. Reverbs are faced with erasure as technological progress and interactional authenticity forces their submission to a hyper-resonant future. Damps are afforded exceptional spaces as exceptions and fail to challenge the processes that cast them as such. If the future experience is one of virtual

ubiquity and hyper-resonant reality, then the interactional practices in virtual worlds that forge the ideal experience for "gamers" (read: hyper-geek men stereotype) and reject "other" players, are the barriers that must be overcome to realize a more inclusive gamer social category. And, if more players can experience game worlds as full of epic meaning, productivity, deep social bonds, and hopes of success (McGonigal 2011), then the convergence of a hyper-resonant reality will be a serendipitous conclusion as game worlds fold on themselves and life becomes a game that can include anyone and invigorates all those who decide to play.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

The primary research goal for this dissertation was to describe and investigate the realities of virtual game worlds and discuss how the virtual social barriers presented in these worlds was potentially problematic to future gaming excursions in moving toward a hyper-resonant reality. If virtual game worlds are a germinal form of a future of virtual ubiquity, then it follows that what was being built and what was being destroyed in those worlds would be the foundation of many social futures. This led me to incorporate a qualitative research approach: "This approach presumes reality exists in textured and dynamic detail in the 'natural' environment of the social world…[and] strives to richly and accurately describe these realities" (Gubrium and Holstein 1997: 19). My goal was a better understanding of this "textured and dynamic detail" in MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games). Put simply, I wanted to study and master the social realities of these worlds.

Qualitative research also marshals the strength of a variety of perspectives and forms. Importantly, there is no one type of qualitative data. Rather, qualitative data "can take the form of fieldnotes, interview transcripts, transcribed recordings of naturally occurring interaction, documents, pictures, and other graphics representations" (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: 4). MMORPGs, as research settings, lend themselves well to a variety of data collection forms. This, in addition to my embedded role in the setting, I believe led me to embrace this inductive approach which concerns itself with underlying meaning, process, and richness in data (Babbie 2004; Denzin 1997; Lofland et al. 2006).

IMMERSION AND SETTING

The conception of my research began with my own immersion into MMORPG worlds. In 2003, I became thoroughly involved in the world of Vana'diel which was the virtual place of *FFXI.* After that, I began playing several MMORPGs including, but not limited to, *WoW*, *Final Fantasy XIV* (*FFXIV*), *Flyff*, *Rose*, *Sword of the New World*, *Lineage 2*, *Requiem*, *Warhammer*, *Ether Saga*, *Pandora Saga*, *Shin Megami Tensei*, *Florensia*, *EverQuest* (*EQ*), and *Guild Wars* (*GW*). I also worked as a salesclerk for GameStop (a software retailer) from 2000 to 2006. During this time, I spoke with dozens of MMORPG players, as they purchased software about online gaming. In addition, I have been an avid RPG fan for the last 15 years, and have witnessed the genre evolve slowly from single-player console experiences into multiplayer virtual realms. Through this foundation, I was able to establish solid connections with MMORPG players as I accompanied them in their virtual exploits.

Vana'diel was truly an overwhelming experience for me, even as a longtime role-playing game consumer. The virtual worlds that have been constructed to create the MMORPG experience are vast and deep. As I write this, virtual worlds are alive, breathing, evolving, and shaping experiences. Virtual currency is being exchanged for real money. Players are laboring vigorously to better equip their avatars, craft ethereal items, purchase and breed virtual beasts to ride, or virtual novelty items to boost their social status. Players are making friends, falling in love, experimenting in cyber erotic play, forming tight social networks, creating and dissolving guilds, falling out of love, and losing friends. Players are "retiring" from the game or returning to it, rolling new characters, and cancelling accounts. Players are roaming across the virtual fields and they are hiding deep in the greenest forests. They are slaying adorable wildlife and they are killing hideous abominations. Some players are bored to tears thinking about switching to

another game, but most of them, in ways they cannot always express, are having fun.

Understanding the complexities of these experiences and the approach of "starting where you are" (Lofland et al. 2006) required my "complete membership" role (Adler and Adler 1987), to become an investigation of my own "nest" (Lofland et al. 2006). "Anyone who decides to conduct research openly...has the task of making their intentions known [and] gaining cooperation from the setting participants...However, the participant researcher who is already a member or insider...has the advantage of already knowing the 'cast of characters'...such knowledge is part of the badge of membership " (Lofland et al. 2006: 41). Having been embedded in the gaming setting prior to my academic interest in it, I was already a "complete member" (Adler and Adler 1987), allowing me to explore this "opportunistic" (Riemer 1977) research project. "Researchers in the complete membership role are those who study scenes where they are already members or those who become converted to genuine membership during the course of their research" (Adler and Adler 1994: 380). The strengths of this complete membership role include negotiating (or arguably, negating) the difficulties of gaining entrée, reflexivity, and triangulation with other methods (Adler and Adler 1994). These benefits were evident in my dissertation work. First, my compound gamer/researcher role was not resisted by the vast majority of players (I had very few "rejections"). Second, this approach allowed me to be reflexive in my conceptual constructions, lending them to augmentation as the research progressed. Finally, I was able to combine my observations, field notes, informal interviews, and experiences in situ with semi-structured interviews outside the setting (although "summing" different data types may not always be considered to produce better understandings of the social world, see Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Fielding and Fielding 1986).

To date, although I have logged approximately 600 days of game play in the

aforementioned titles over a six year period, I draw disproportionately from my immersive experiences in *FFXI* (250 days), *WoW* (150 days) and *FFXIV* (100 days). My settings were the virtual worlds I inhabited over the years (two servers in *FFXI*, three in *WoW*, and one in *FFXIV*) and where I found myself in them both geographically and socially as guided by my research interests. I "leveled" numerous characters to current level caps (the maximum level). I played both with gender consistent avatars (Cypress, Cyp, Cypress again, Zimothe, Zenzen were some of my virtual men) as well as gender-bending avatars (Lynneth, Silmeria, Dalmasca, Temcara, Lynn, Hazumu were some of my virtual women). I also embodied multiple "roles" in respect my class choices to experience multiple aspects of group play. I played "tanks" (e.g., Paladin, Warrior, Ninja, Death Knight), I played damage dealing (DD or DPS) classes (e.g., Samurai, Archer, Black Mage, Rogue, Warlock, Hunter), as well as caster/healer classes (e.g., Conjuror, Thaumaturge, Priest, Druid, Shaman). Moreover, I spent an incredible amount of time "crafting" (e.g., Weaving, Leatherworking, Carpentry, Goldsmithing, Blacksmithing, Armorsmithing, Cooking, Alchemy, Enchanting, Inscription) and "gathering" (e.g., Mining, Botany, Herbalism, Skinning, Fishing) as a way of exchanging goods and assisting my informants in game.

My dissertation research is drawn mainly from my experiences in *FFXI*, *WoW*, and *FFXIV* because I spent far more time in Vana'diel, Azeroth, and Eorzea than I did in other worlds. I also felt a sense of "game mastery" (Taylor 2006) in these games, which was evident in my participation in "end-game" activities and deep knowledge of the areas, jobs, crafts, monsters, and so on of these worlds. Game mastery, I felt, was vital in understanding how players felt and related to elements of the game. In other words, my skill and longevity in these games provided me a strong sense of what these games were about and the complex relationships within them as they related to game designs.

Game mastery also made interviews and conversations with players fruitful because I could easily compare my own experiences with theirs and it gave me a deeper understanding of the data (Blumer 1969). Additionally, possessing evidence of game mastery, that is, my characters, their levels, accomplishments, equipment, concretely crafted my presentation as a legitimate gamer. In this sense, I was closer to the realities of the players I spent time with and interviewed, and less likely to be considered an outsider or (arguably worse and more applicable) a newbie, who would by extension not be able to understand the game or the players in it.

Developing rapport and richness in my data were paramount (Rubin and Rubin 1997). I cannot sufficiently stress the importance of spending a large amount of time in this setting (Emerson 2001; Maxwell 2005). I nurtured my relationships with other players through extensive quality in-game time. I befriended players, spent time chatting informally with them (online), and assisted them in their gaming goals (leveling, completing quests, slaying countless mobs, and farming). My extensive "insider knowledge" (Lofland et al. 2006) of games and gaming allowed me a high level of trust to foster these relationships and arguably allowed for more in-depth data.

The enormous amount of time I spent immersed in the scene/field, provided invaluable abilities in collecting data and understanding the data I collected. Maxwell (2005) emphasizes that "the researcher is the instrument of the research, and the research relationships are the means by which the research gets done" (83). Immersion in this setting was vital to my understanding of the various meanings of the world, the language, and its players. Goffman argues, "you should spend at least a year in the field. Otherwise you don't get a random sample, you don't get a range of unanticipated events, you don't get deep familiarity" (as cited by Emerson 2001: 157). For me, this was evident in the dynamic nature of MMORPGs. These games were always changing,

always being reassessed, updated and patched, and expansion packs (Xpacs) were frequently released (adding new features or changing old ones). Indeed, they were *games in motion*. Since the game and the virtual world were evolving, relationships within that world were also changing. Merely creating a character and playing a small portion of the game would *never* be sufficient in understanding the MMORPG world. The importance of reflexivity and continually restructuring relationships with my informants in these virtual worlds was paramount (Maxwell 2005). Anytime I was absent from the virtual world due to solid world obligations (school, work, other activities) I had to reestablish my commitment to those virtual relationships with quality time, online chat, and virtual favors.[6]

Spending a vast amount of time in the MMORPG setting was also necessary due to the dynamic nature of the gaming language. Indeed, the gamer lexicon[7] is so fluid and changes so rapidly that data collection, writing papers, and continuing to inhabit the scene had to largely be conducted simultaneously (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Lofland et al. 2006). Learning the language required a significant amount of time and still remains a dynamic process (see Glossary section). Many words are contextualized, carry multiple meanings, or vary in their applicability by game. However, without knowing how and what players were saying, it would have been impossible or inaccurate to infer anything from such superficial data collection. To better understand this I provide the following quote from an interviewee in my fieldnotes, followed by my interpretation:

Nvr bin into dd, think its fo players who like showing their epeen. I live and die rdm ftw.

[6] For example, crafting items for players, helping them run through dungeons or finish quests, or possibly power-leveling them.

[7] See the Glossary for specific examples.

> Everyone loves refresh whore, and I can solo some endgame Nms (sub nin) as well as farm and kill w/o healtime. *(From author's fieldnotes)*

Attempts to translate the above comment without knowing the acronyms, the roles of jobs in games, or the labels given in the virtual world would yield, at best, false results. However, because I had read hundreds of forum posts, logged 600 days of game play, and chatted with hundreds of players, I can translate the above and efficiently speak the gaming language: the player is explaining that he enjoys playing a Red Mage, which is a class in *FFXI*, because he is sought after in groups due to a particular magic spell (Refresh), and has comparable ability to fight alone against rare monsters (NMs or notorious monsters) when he uses Ninja, another class in the game, as a sub-job (Ninjas have spells that make them difficult to hit). He also claims he does not have a big online ego like players of Damage Dealer classes. Becoming fluent in "game speak," as well as reaching a certain level of game mastery, allowed me to cultivate *and* understand the various forms of data I collected from my immersive experiences in these worlds, and to "be there" in time and space (Gubrium and Holstein 1997: 19).

OBSERVATIONAL DATA AND FIELDNOTES

"The leap from acknowledging an interpretive dimension to ethnography to viewing it as exclusively interpretive neglects other essential aspects of the fieldwork enterprise—most critically, the rigorous collection of observational and interview data" (Lofland et al. 2006: 84). Although the interviews I conducted (discussed in the next section) contributed greatly to my understanding and the presentation of my data, academic inquires must remain vigilant because "action and talk are not always consistent with each other, and it is important to document divergence as well and consistency" (Lofland et al. 2006: 87). This is evident in classic studies such as Hochschild's *Second Shift* (1989) that explicitly contrasts interviewees' ideological

claims with their everyday actions.

Having been aware of this, my observations and participation in the gaming worlds allowed me to document and compare my experiences and those of other players "in situ" (Lofland et al. 2006: 88). In other words, during play I could informally question other players with whom I spent time in these worlds. These inquiries also captured players' thoughts and feelings *in the moment they occurred*. In situ questions allowed me to glean what was currently salient in the context and interactions that were occurring, as nested in the setting. For example, Xenobia (discussed in Chapter 5) reacted to many players lusting after her in game, with very charged rants about these players *as they were harassing her.* The harassment was particularly salient in those moments and she was more than willing to disclose her charged feelings and reactions about those players to me. However, when asked about her experiences in her later interview, she spoke almost exclusively about the positives of her current relationship with a Paladin in our guild (her most conscious difficulty being that he was playing a female avatar and she was having a difficult time eroticizing her in game).

To document my observations and experiences online I kept several files of field notes. "Fieldnotes are accounts describing experiences and observations the researcher has made while participating in an intense and involved manner" (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995: 5). Field notes are not "best-fit" descriptions of an event or setting. There are multiple versions of even the "same" situation; they are "inscriptions of social life" (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995: 8). A researcher as an instrumental tool to the project inevitably leaves out, misses, or gravitates toward events in the field. I acknowledge that the thrust of this project guided my interests as I continued to play and record. I found that conducting descriptive "jottings" while playing MMORPGs was rather impractical, as the amount of information that can be recorded is

overwhelming:

> *The baker Thomas Miller yells "Fresh bread for sale!" The storm guards are on patrol as usual. A night elf rogue asks me if I can enchant icy weapon. I tell him that I am a leatherworker, and apologize for being unable to do so. He says, "no prob" and goes on his way. A player I know logs on and comes to find me in the middle of the Stormwind market. I am standing next to a large tree and there are two storm guards in front of the tree. The auction house is slightly behind me inside a building. The mail box and bank are around the corner to my right. The player I know finds me, she pokes me in emote. We chat generally about the game. Meanwhile players are rushing by me. A paladin summons his steed and rushes towards the mailbox. A shaman jumps over my head, and two hunters run by me with their pets in tow. The storm guards make their usual pre-programmed conversation about a player that just completed a quest. A druid buffs my character with thorns and mark of the wild. A level 1 paladin is healing different player characters standing in my vicinity, jumping about casting and recasting his heal spell. Another character has laid down a firework, which soon explodes into little sparkles. (From author's fieldnotes)*

However, my expertise allowed me to circumvent the technical and mechanical interests that may have been more relevant to another researcher, or someone lacking a game savvy identity. Guided by my interests in masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and goldfarming, among others, I recorded fieldnotes that were more relevant to those topics.

Fieldnotes were recorded in a Word document as I played or shortly after a play session. To accomplish this, I used several methods to make recording practical. Most often, I "multiboxed," which put simply, is to play the game in "windowed mode" which allows access to

other programs, the desktop, and so forth. Windowed mode is a less-than-full screen resolution mode where the game screen can be dislocated, minimized, and re-sized. This meant I could open a Word file or several Word files, and actively "jot" notes about anything of interest to my research. Occasionally, I used two separate monitors one occupied with the game screen, the other with my open files and notes. Multiboxing is also a common practice among some gamers because it allows them to simultaneously search wiki sites and browse forums about the game as they play the game (or in extreme cases, play two accounts or more at the same time).

Additionally, I kept extensive archives of "screenshot" files. Screenshots are just that, visual snapshots of the game screen or the computer screen. In some games, the ability to capture a screenshot is a function nested within the game itself. When the player uses a particular command the game screen is saved and filed. These shots can be accessed in the player's computer or, as in *FFXI*, screenshots were archived in the account and had to be copied and moved (because space was rather limited). Alternatively, in *FFXIV* there was no game function to allow screenshots, so I used the default method of using the "Prt Scr" (Print Screen) function on the computer itself to snapshot my computer screen and paste the image in *Paint*. I would save those images as JPEG files. Any screens I presented to the public (talks, presentations) were filtered for any avatar identifiers besides my own. I did this by opening the JPEG files into *Adobe Photoshop* and blurring (using the Healing Brush tool) avatar names. The protection and confidentiality of my informants was very important. Although currently there is no consensus regarding online research forums such as this one and whether they qualify as public or private (Hine 2000, 2005), my informants' virtual identities may be as important if not more so than their solid world identities. Because of this, I attempted to ensure their virtual identities remained confidential, which has become increasingly more difficult as MMORPGs are creating mediums

that increase avatar visibility to those that do not play the game (e.g., *WoW*'s Armory or *FFXIV*'s Lodestone). Screenshots were later written up into the corresponding fieldnote file. Specifically, I kept three file types of field notes: empirical, analytical, and epistemological and a separate, more personal "reflections" file (see Lofland et al. 2006).

EMPIRICAL FILES

Exemplars from the data marked “from author’s fieldnotes” are extracted from one of three files: empirical, analytical, or epistemological. Most often, examples are pulled from the empirical file in which I recorded conversations with players in the setting (informal interviewing or questioning “in situ”) or conversations among players in chat channels (for example, shouts between players in a town or a conversation among guild members in guild chat detailing a battle in-game or perhaps a falling-out among comrades). "Ethnomethodologists view conversation as part of the machinery for constructing social organization. The principal question for them is not what the social organization under construction is, but how it is constituted in speech and interaction" (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:33). It was important not only to see how players were playing the game, but also how players were discussing the game and other players.

Conversation also occurs simultaneously with different people and on different levels in MMORPGs. The above example of my conversation with Xenobia was occurring in whisper between her and I while she was receiving whispers from the men harassing her, as well as other men (or boys) harassing her in her guild chat, of which I was also able to witness (because I was a member of the same guild). In this way, I was able to record what was being discussed and who was discussing it, while simultaneously identifying any additional audiences to the conversation. For example, I was able to read the guild chat without always being part of the

conversation. All of these elements created a sort of *interactional implosion* where multiple players were holding multiple conversations with multiple players on multiple levels, all the while considering (or not considering) intended and unintended audiences. A conversation among linkshell members in *FFXIV* helps convey this phenomenon:

> Player A: Do you have any skank for me? (*speaking to a member of his party, but in linkshell chat*)
>
> Player B: go to the corner and get one
>
> Player C: I do indeed (*the party member, who trades Player A the Antelope Shanks*)
>
> Player A: Good skank makes great pies- everyone knows that
>
> Player D: Makes me miss my navy days
>
> Player A: ok that should be enough to make 18 pies. you guys are laughing at my skank pies?
>
> *Bowman: mature aren't they?* (*private tell to me from Bowman, we are both watching the linkshell chat*)
>
> Player C: I <3 skank pies
>
> Player E: lol Player A - skank pies..... {Thanks for the offer, but I'll have to pass}
>
> Player A: they're really good
>
> *Me: it is an interesting convo* (*private tell to Bowman from me*)
>
> Player E: that's like chewing bubble gum you pick off the bottom of a public bench
>
> Player A: but I got enough skank that there's pie for everyone! ;D
>
> (*From author's fieldnotes*)

In this conversation, Player A was on some level discussing his ability to craft Antelope Shanks (a game item) into pies for character consumption (eating food usually grants positive effects for

characters). However, he used this conversation to reinforce the sexuality standards that women are required to adhere to (Bogle 2008; Wilkins 2008) and was supported by his male friends through joking (at the expense of all women) as a way for men to bond (Lyman 1987) leading them to instead discuss "skanks" and "pies" and not the in-game items themselves. This conversation was also clearly visible to those that were not taking part (e.g., Bowman, me, and many others). Although indirect, Player A and the participants broadcast their conclusions about women's sexuality to a perceived but possibly unidentified audience. The likelihood is high that women were watching the conversation, and the message of what these men think about women's sexuality is clear.

ANALYTICAL FILES

My second file, the analytical file, contained my critical musings and the cultivation of my theoretical nexus. These fieldnotes were meant to be a running log in developing my nexus using proto-concepts, organizing themes, and general patterns. Whereas the empirical file is descriptive, geared toward thickness and depth, the analytical file began a process of data reduction and allowed me to develop conceptual models for future writings:

> *One concept of interest to me (and a salient one of late) has again been the 'epeen.' In short, epeen is a term tossed around by players that notes a certain kind of ego that is coupled with online games. Specifically, it seems to apply almost exclusively to men and it is frequently attached to imagery of the penis (or more accurately the phallus). The term itself supposedly is derived from "e-penis" a sort of virtual phallus. This concept seems applicable to how geek men are believed to "compensate" for, to be blunt "failing at life" (as the players would put it). Its application stinks of hegemonic masculinity and*

casts geek men as failing in some way to be men, so in turn they inhabit and dominate the virtual world. However, the concept is not a positive, it reeks of criticism. To show off or "wave around" one's epeen is almost to say a man is dropping his pants to prove he is really male- whipping around his penis as it were in order to claim what many think he should claim. In MMORPGs this is more about showing off by subjugating the virtual world- whether it is mobs, or other players. One can use virtual accomplishments (which vary from obtaining coveted goods, to slaying gods, to have a powerful avatar, etc) to access status in the virtual world. However, this often backfires if that player is too bold in asserting their "online badass-ness" (another way to see this concept). When one goes too far (this also means that to a point it's acceptable to have some feeling of game mastery), one is marked as compensating and often reminded that it is foolish to pursue an online badass status (though almost hypocritically, most players do regardless). It is as if you may do it, but should not claim it yourself (having others ogle you in-game and "stroke your epeen" seems perfectly acceptable though). (From author's fieldnotes)

The analytical file allowed me to critically "play" with ideas about what I was observing, experiencing, and thinking. This file was a process file devoted more to grinding raw data into organized forms, themes, concepts, but also remained a fluid process of augmentation, reexamination, and evolution. Themes I began to see emerge in the empirical files from in-game conversations, events, and informal interviews were discussed in the analytical file. This is where the questioning and theorizing began.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL FILES

Finally, my difficulties, role conflicts, and the shortcomings of my research approach

were kept within the epistemological file. These notes documented conflicts such as juggling the roles of researcher and gamer, resistance within the game world to my academic inquiry, and difficulties with the research project itself, the scope, the methods, the approach, and so on. This file was about why the research was the way it was and why it remained research more than anything else:

> *Tonight I was invited to do a mission that did not serve my own character's needs in the game, something extremely time consuming, and boring to boot. I reluctantly accepted the invite and wasted an entire night I could have spent working, grading, writing, or pursuing my own interests. I got nothing out of it, but I hope that by not disappointing the players that are counting on me that I can count on them in the future. I believe this is exactly what is meant by "whoring for data." The quest itself was a grand waste of time and effort. We crawled a dungeon for about eight hours without being able to go deeper than a few levels, wiping consistently, and gaining nothing in terms of loot or XP. Dawn broke and my Friday night was gone. However, they did appreciate my being there to tank and more or less viewed the night as "good fun." (From author's field notes)*

Personally, my greatest struggle was negotiating my time with the reality of a setting that never stopped, never slept, and never went away. Virtual worlds are easy to access, are alive around the clock, and are overwhelming deep. Making personal decisions about what was "enough" immersion and "enough" play was difficult as a novice researcher (and as an expert gamer). I felt compelled to log on (even beyond my usual love of gaming) because I could be missing some event or developing my relationships with other players (players who were peppered across the solid world, which meant there was *always* someone logged on).

The epistemological file also tracked any resistance to my researcher role. In spite of my

extensive time spent in the setting, I encountered some (albeit not much) unforeseen resistance to my academic inquiry. One particular sphere of resistance was how the techniques of social control implemented by the creators of MMORPGs burgeoned fear in the player base when the threat of a possible ban loomed. Game creators (Square-Enix, Blizzard, Sony, etc.) control a great deal of the discourse surrounding certain behaviors in MMORPGs, specifically, behaviors that violate the ToS (Terms of Service) agreement to which players were supposed to adhere. Because the game creators had the power to ban accounts (meaning players would permanently lose all character data) some were fearful of my seemingly vague curiosity. I believe some players feared I was working with the game creators in order to ferret out players who violated the ToS (violations include using hacks, bots, or participating in RMT) and report them to the GMs who would in turn ban their account. Even proving my affiliation with the University of Colorado had little effect in some cases because it did not prove that I was not contracted by a game creator. Although this never led to an outright "rejection" (discussed in the next section), this was still an unexpected but understandable miscalculation on my part that highlighted how important players' account are to them, how pervasive the social control of the game creators can be, and possibly the prevalence of "deviant" gaming behavior that violates the ToS.

It was also difficult to assess when to "disclose" that I was a researcher in these virtual games. Most of the in-game relationships I was involved in developed at a steady rate. When players began discussing their own lives or inquiring about my life outside the game, I would discuss my life as a graduate student and my research interests. I did not shout to every zone or tell every guild immediately about my role, but discussed my "real life" at the same pace as they discussed theirs. In the years I have spent in these games, I had only one remarkably adverse response to my researcher role. One particular guild which was held to the "highest of moral

standards" (self-proclaimed) booted me after finding out I was a graduate student doing research, which I can confidently conclude was a peculiar reaction contrasting my usual warm reception from the gaming community (and one supported by a minority of "high ranking" guild members, but not the entire guild). Most players found my research "really cool," "very awesome," or were extremely excited that I was writing about MMORPGs (and perhaps somewhat surprised there was a university that was allowing me to use gaming as a research project).

REFLECTIONS

Additionally I kept a file of "reflections," which were more personal than scholarly (although it remained difficult to completely mute my identity as an academic). Reflections were about recording my own thoughts and feelings about my experiences in the virtual world in respect to my identity as a gamer (this is encouraged in some capacity by Lofland et al. 2006 although they seem to be for personal reference to document the researcher's emotional state at the time of recording rather than utilized as exemplars for readers). I found my gamer identity, when my researcher role was compartmentalized, embodied a different voice that was equally insightful to record and share. Reflections were personal:

> *MMORPGs have swallowed a large portion of my time. I conservatively estimate I have spent some 600 days inside virtual worlds (and some players I know have spent far more). If it was not for the fact that I turned this hobby into a research project that will likely provide me (hopefully) future employment, I would have to stretch for what that time was spent for and how I feel about having spent it. In a way, MMORPGs have disrupted so much in my life I wonder if the cost was worth the reward. Clocking nearly two years of time spent mindless mashing keyboard buttons (sometimes in such ennui I*

cannot explain what motivated me to continue) is really...disheartening. There were the adventures shared, the moments of fleeting excitement, my rank 10 Bastok mission, fighting Shadowlord, deathwarping after obtaining my first coffer, my flying mount, my first battleground, launch day of a many new expansions, felling infamous monsters, so many triumphs...but at such a high cost in time and dedication I often wonder if any of it is worth the effort. Most salient is that the good is often contrasted so heavily with the bad, the fallouts, the friendships broken, the items and accounts stolen, the greed, the shouting matches, the disharmony, the pettiness. In one hand, I began to think "well, it's only a game" in a defensive response to how the ugliness fermented in the virtual world, and seeing players with less invested (even if just through lip service) as possibly more disruptive. And in the other, I notice the ugliness was also done because the game meant so much (stealing or buying money to be a better player). The game means something, boasting to friends, helping allies, clocking damage, doing things few have done, whatever the motivation, game or not, the disharmony was there. But my precious time is gone. I cannot help but lament over the time that has been eaten away. Sometimes days and weeks would rush by without my notice, as though I was in a dreamlike state. Occasionally, I would awaken on one particular day, walk out into the world and for a moment realize I am still here - somehow - attached to this existence even though I had spent every waking hour for countless days somewhere else, inside my head, inside those worlds. (Reflections)

This final, more personal file kept track of my emotions, feelings, discord about the project itself or about gaming in general (especially in reference to my personal life and identities). I distinguish between "from author's fieldnotes" (empirical, analytical, and epistemological) and

“reflections” in my use of the data by citing each respectively.

INTERVIEWS

In addition to my extensive time in the field, I interviewed 70 (N = 70) MMORPG players (20 female players and 50 male players, although slight gender identification fluidity applied to a couple of cases). These interviews were conducted after submitting a human subjects proposal to the CU-B IRB and obtaining approval [HRC protocol #1007.40]. The age of the participants in my study ranged from 18 to 48-years-old, the average age for men was 26.7 and the average age for women was 30.1. Yee (2009) notes that the gender and age distribution for players highlights two dominant groups: younger men (reporting 72.2% between 12 and 28 in a sample of 2439) and slightly older women (reporting 80.2% between 23 and 40 in a sample of 404). Additionally, of the 20 women I interviewed almost half (9) had children, while only three of the men had children. Although I would not attempt to generalize from my interviewees' age distribution, the slight difference in average age by gender does seem similar to Yee's work.

The majority of my interviewees reported logging at least 100 days in one or a combination of MMORPGs (the highest value reported was a "rounded" 1000 days, and over half had clocked a full year [365 days] in game time). Most interviewees were located in the United States (n = 54), although some were from Australia (n = 3), Mexico (n = 2), Canada (n = 4), and parts of Europe (n = 7). I recruited participants predominately through the relationships I built with them in the game. I informed them about my research (although they were aware before I solicited each of them for an interview) and asked if they would allow me to interview them over a medium of their choosing (usually in respect to geographical limitations).

I required a few rapport building milestones be fulfilled before I solicited a player for an

interview. Relationships building online almost inevitably demanded some form of disclosure about real life identities (discussion of jobs, experiences of being a parent, troubles with romance and so forth). I believed a certain level of disclosure and rapport building was necessary to the process of disclosing my researcher role and my interests (Hine 2000, 2005). As players exchanged "real life" information with me, I would do the same. Additionally, I believed that spending time with players in game was important for establishing rapport and deeper disclosure. Because of this, I did not seek interviews from players until I had known them in game for over a month (and sometimes much longer), even after they were aware of my research role. I felt this was important because some of the critiques of and caution toward online research has targeted whether one can be confident that the person is being honest about age, gender, and so forth (Hine 2000, 2005). Reaching a certain level of rapport where this information was exchanged openly served to (in theory) reduce this problem, as well as remain ethically bound to my HRC protocol in which I claimed I would not recruit participants below the age of 18 years-old. I also recruited a handful of interviewees (n = 8) through my connections with GameStop and from MMORPG forums as way of examining possible systematic bias (i.e., perhaps I developed relationships with a certain set of people more easily than others).

My initial interview pool consisted of a typical geek landscape. After recruiting about 30 interviewees, I began looking for other groups in the virtual world that were not the typical crowd as guided by my research interests and theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967). For example, searching for more socially orientated and casual guilds over end-game guilds that concentrated on measuring virtual accomplishments. Another example was the GLBT guild "Fusion" I found and remained a member of during the final few months of my stay in Azeroth. This was an extremely marginalized group of players who were clearly conscious of the hostility

they faced from a majority of players in *WoW*.

I received nine "rejections" in my requests for interviews, for a variety of different reasons. There were two outright rejections to an interview. Both players had been involved with my romantic partner a year previous to my asking for an interview. Their involvement with my partner at the time was unbeknownst to me (the partner disclosed this to me months later), and their declining the interview seemed odd considering the time I had spent playing together with them. I also had seven players who I would consider more "non-respondents" than rejections. These players were of two types. First, four of them quit the game for personal reasons after being asked for an interview or before we could schedule one (the game had eaten away their lives, or they failed out of school, or the game was boring so they quit). Two of them sent me a letter of apology in game claiming they had to quit while they were intent on doing so. The other two simply disappeared after bemoaning the game was not engaging (it may be possible they will return, but as I write this they have not). The final three of the non-respondents were more "unable to schedule" than anything else. These three players were so "hardcore" that every moment they could spare was spent in playing the game. Although they consented, they did not want to leave the game world to be interviewed (because logging out was, in essence, wasting valuable game time).

Interviews were conducted over several mediums, including face to face (n = 14), phone or voicechat programs (n = 17), and instant message (IM) programs (n = 39). Markham (1998) has noted a few differences in IM interviewing, most notably that nonverbal cues are unavailable, writing takes longer than talking, and the pace of a conversation is difficult to grasp in text-only chat. While these assessments were true of my own interviews, MMORPG players were used to this communication medium. Players often used emoticons, “lols,” or other forms

of acknowledgement to keep conversations feeling smooth much the same as they did while chatting in game. I consciously followed Markham's (1998) advice of allowing for longer silences (not typing new questions) to encourage fuller disclosures and longer stories. IM interviews took considerably longer to conduct, but were equally in-depth.

Consistent with similar data gathering, I utilized a themed interview guide with built-in flexibility to remain reflexive to the experiences of each participant (Fontana and Frey 2000; Kvale 1996). The interview guide was not strictly followed, and the interviews were not rigidly "structured." Each interview had a "flow" that varied with the experiences of the participant. As an interviewer, I attempted to remain an "active listener" (more aptly a "responder/watcher" in IM interviewing, using written prompts and silences to replace nonverbal cues and visual attention) with "evenly hovering attention" and managed enthusiasm (Kvale 1996: 135). The forum of the interview was their choice, as I wanted to ensure their comfort. Telephone, voicechat, and face-to-face interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and later transcribed and deleted. IM interviews were duplicated into a separate file and transcribed, eliminating screen names. Interviews ranged from one to five hours, with an average of 2.5 hours. Exemplars from the interview data are prefaced with pseudonyms, ages, solid/virtual gender, and games they played. Pseudonyms neither reflect the players' names, their avatars' names, nor their screen names. This ensures their confidentially in the wake of systems like *WoW's* "Armory," which allows anyone to search for any avatar by name alone. Pseudonyms chosen are generic fantasy genre names and based on my personal preference.

CODING AND ANALYSIS

"Analysis is not about adhering to any one correct approach or set of right techniques; it

is imaginative, artful, flexible, and reflexive. It should be methodical, scholarly, and intellectually rigorous" (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: 10). I transcribed all interviews myself and used an inductive approach guided by my observations and time in the field to construct sets of themes from the data (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Mawwell 2005). I felt my nested role as a complete member coupled with the firsthand experience of transcribing the data brought me even closer to understanding my areas of investigation. I coded my data into broad topics of interest through a process of reading and re-reading the transcripts and organizing data into useful categories (Charmaz 2008; Corbin 2008). I continued coding and analysis as I was collecting data, allowing me to augment my interview guide and solidify my evolving conceptual models. This work was done in tandem with my critical musings, which were part of my analytical fieldnotes file. "Coding here is actually about going beyond the data, thinking creatively with the data, asking the data questions, and generating theories and frameworks" (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: 30). Transcribed interviews and field notes (as well as transcribed screenshots) were pooled and coded for themes of interest in a process of "data reduction." Additionally, I organized my data into "talk" about topics that were congruent with my research interests.

Using general headings in multiple Word files, I created aggregate files for whole themes and categories (for example, "cybersex talk"). These umbrella themes were initially coded for ideas and phrases of significance which became more focused as I continued to conduct interviews and spend more time in the setting (Lofland et al. 2006). In other words, my initial questions were general and covered a large range of topics (although clustered into topics of my own research interests). Interviewee responses allowed me to narrow my focus on each theme. These broad themes were further organized into sub-concepts (e.g., "reasons not to cyber" or "cybersex restraints") that allowed me to ask more specific questions in later interviews. This

required a process of reflexively analyzing the data and continuing to augment the thrust of my questions. Eventually, I experienced diminished novelty in data collection, which arguably suggested that I had reached theoretical saturation and had a more complete set of codes for my models.

Through my time spent in multiple worlds embodying multiple roles, my wealth of insider knowledge (Lofland et al. 2006) and understanding of the gamer lexicon, in addition to my extensive fieldnote and screenshot files and my in-depth interviews with gamers who I spent at least a month and upwards of two years playing alongside in the virtual world, I forged the following data chapters. Utilizing the data gathered through the multiple methods detailed above, I believe I was able to garner a deep understanding of a number of social processes in these virtual worlds. Specifically, the emergent themes from the data markedly demonstrated how social categories and identity politics are recreated and enforced through virtual conversation and relationships, eroding minimal efforts of resistance to a future of hyper-resonance and possibly dispersing the potential for a more inclusive gamer identity.

CHAPTER 4

THE MANTHRA TALES: CAUTIONARY PLAY IN FANTASY WORLDS

I went to the guild website to sign up, join the forum discussions, post my crafting levels and participate as any active member is required. A post there read "Straight up all the ladies who say they are ladies and yet to prove it...only missing the KFC bucket chillin on the rubadub dub" and the message was coupled with a picture of a very obese, bearded, white man who was sitting at a computer wearing large glasses and no clothing. (From author's fieldnotes)

Gender remains "omnirelavent" (West and Zimmerman 1987) even in "synthetic worlds" (Castronova 2005) such as those in MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games). The maintenance and persistence of gendered activities and gender accountability have contributed to essentialist assumptions of the differences between women and men (Jeffreys 1996; Lorber 1993; Messerschmidt 2007; West and Zimmerman 1987). Although entirely virtual existences, worlds, and spaces were once assumed to allow for dynamic and fluid presentations of self (Cherny and Weise 1996; McRae 1997; Turkle 1995, 1999), researchers have continued to gather evidence that online realities merely reconstruct and reify existing assumptions about gender (Castronova 2005; Kendall 2000, 2002; Nardi 2010; Taylor 2003, 2006). With respect to gaming online, gender is "omnipresent"-- always performed and always accountable (West and Zimmerman 1987), while interacting with players.

It is important to note that MMORPGs, and the avatars within them, are not created in a vacuum. Taylor (2006) and Higgins (2009) have argued that the limitations of avatar options in respect to gender and race (solid world race) may reinforce culturally idealized bodies and curtail

players' ability to choose what they want in virtual worlds. This is evident in the aesthetic appeal of the gendered avatars: females have thin waists, exceptionally large breasts, and curvy hips, while males have rippling abs, swollen biceps, and chiseled features. Implicit in this argument is that game creators operate on these conventions thus limiting players to only certain choices in regard to avatars, which limits them from creating their *own* character (Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006). Game designers are also constrained by technology and economic rhetoric that encourages them to market to particular audiences and aim for "bestseller" titles (Ivory 2006; Konzack 2007; Taylor 2006). This means that MMORPG worlds and avatars are built in the solid world, and though they exist in the virtual, they are hardly created using a "blank slate." This contrasts somewhat with the predecessors of MMORPGs, Multi-User Dimensions (MUDs), which arguably allowed for more creativity on the players part in "avatar" creation. Specific to gender, players of MUDs could select gender "neutral" characters or "morph" between genders (Cherny and Weise 1996; McRae 1997; Turkle 1995). Although MUD players within the game would question the meaning of such selections (Cherny and Weise 1996; Kendall 2002; McRae 1997; Turkle 1995), no such neutral or undefined area exists in MMORPGs where the bodies of avatars often exaggerate gender and players merely select one of two options (there are few exceptions to this binary limitation).[8]

This dichotomy is reinforced in the game world itself as a consequence of game design. Outfits and equipment are augmented with respect to the gender of the avatar. Either certain items are gender exclusive such as the "Lilac Corsage" in *Final Fantasy XI* (*FFXI*) (a female-

[8] In *Pandora Saga*, the "Lapin" race were considered to be gender ambiguous in that there was no gender option and the "game lore" explained Lapin males and females are identical. In *FFXI*, the "Mithra" and "Galka" were female and male exclusive races, players referred to them as "gender locked" races. This same design choice was made in *Final Fantasy XIV* (*FFXIV*) with the Miqo'te and Roegadyn respectively. However, the vast majority of games operate as I have argued in that there are only two gender options.

avatar-only head piece; a pretty flower that women can place in their hair), or identical pieces of equipment have completely different presentation on each gender. For example, a male “Hume” (human race) character could equip the “Byakko’s Haidate” (a piece of leg equipment) in *FFXI* and the green and orange colored shorts would extend to mid-knee. However, a female Hume equipping the same piece of equipment appeared in considerably higher-cut “hot-pants” with brown, form-fitting tights underneath. Female avatars show considerably more skin than male avatars (Beasley and Standley 2002), even while wearing the exact same piece of equipment. Avatars, in this respect, become conduits of culturally defined gender ideals (Meadows 2008). Their presentations, bodies, dress, and emotes (gestures), all reinforce assumed differences between men and women, and in doing so they are seen as proxies for the players controlling them.

However, most players likely operate on the assumption that gaming is what men do, and that women gamers are rare despite growing evidence that this is changing (McGonigal 2011; Yee 2009). Because gaming continues to be presented as a male space, the search for gender in MMORPGs becomes a search for “real women,” and leads to a process of vetting the avatar population for women gamers. This process has become an almost automatic component of the virtual world through the sharing of cautionary tales. Players discuss and recall the "specter" (Pascoe 2005) of the gender faker through sharing stories of romantic debacles, stolen accounts, and cybersex regrets. These "Manthra Tales" (a concept I derived from how men who played "Mithra" [cat women] avatars in *FFXI* were discussed and identified in the player base) are shared as a reminder that men (who are assumed to be heterosexual) should remain vigilant and be critical of any player's claim to be a "woman." The subtext is clear, hyper-resonance is preferable for smooth interactions, any "woman" claiming to be such will have to prove it, and

any gender faker will likely be punished and discussed for posterity.

SEEKING WOMEN GAMERS

There was ongoing debate within MMORPG worlds over the existence, non-existence, or general rarity of women gamers (McGonial 2011; Yee 2009). Male players typically assumed that women were "out there somewhere," but claims to that gender identity were often met with skepticism. This created an interesting dynamic in the game worlds. One might assume that because virtual worlds allow for the creation of multiple identities (McRae 1997; Turkle 1995, 1999), gender switching would be common, normalized, and expected. Furthermore, it was assumed that solid world gender would lessen in importance since players interact predominately with avatars and could easily cloak their solid world statuses. However, unless specifically acknowledged as permissible (for example, on a role-play server where a dampening resonance might be more common), players marshal a gender authenticity norm that demands either that player-to-avatar gender remain consistent or that players controlling opposite gendered avatars openly disclose their "deviance."

Being conscious and cautious of the gender "fakers," players sift through the virtual community assessing claims to gender. This is most pronounced for any player claiming to be a woman in the solid world because women are arguably rewarded just for their presence in MMORPGs with a number of virtual benefits (this is discussed in Chapter 5). Players use their assumptions about gaming culture, avatar choice, in-game behavior, and finally, solid world "proof," to award and celebrate the "woman gamer" in confirming her gender identity. Conversely, with the same valor that actual women gamers are celebrated as actual women, male players who "fake gender" and are exposed during this process, are reviled to an equal extent that

actual women are celebrated: These "fakers" received open hostility, were questioned about their sexuality, and ostracized from the gaming community.

ASSUMING MEN

Virtual worlds have largely been constructed, and were assumed to be populated, by men (Kendall 2002; Taylor 2006; Yee 2009). Because of this, most MMORPG players were also assumed to be men. Although the number of women gamers has increased in these games (McGonigal 2011; Taylor 2006; Yee 2009), players have typically operated on the assumption that male players are far more likely to be behind any given avatar, and especially male avatars.

Only Men Play

The initial phase in the gender vetting process operated on the assumption that gaming online was a male-dominated arena. Corcell, a 27-year-old SM/VM (solid man, virtual man) in *FFXI,* stated: “90 percent of people on MMOs are guys.” Similarly, Zidane a 22-year-old SM/VM in *FFXI,* wrote:

> I doubt there will ever be anything near one-to-one ratio of guys to girls on any MMO, unless it’s designed to be that way. I don’t think they [girls] find games like this as interesting. It does take a certain personality to like MMO's and you see it more in guys.

By default, it was assumed that the virtual world was disproportionately filled with men. This meant that any given avatar in the virtual world was likely to be a male player, and precluded any need for players to prove themselves to be men in the solid world. Even women could easily claim to be men. When they did, they were not asked to prove their solid world gender. Freya, a 22-year-old SW/VW (solid woman, virtual woman) and hardcore *FFXI* player explained:

> I usually pick characters that are the same gender as me since then it is easier to get involved in the game I am playing. I figure that with an MMO, you'd want to put yourself out there so why not choose the right gender? I was kind of naive about that though when I started to play MMO and didn't see myself becoming the object of many a mouth-breathing-moron's desires, but ho-hum! The beauty of the internet is that you can just say you're a guy and they'll run away thinking that it is so.

Freya was repelled by some male players' romantic and sexual advances and so she sometimes claimed to be a man, because it was a taken-for-granted reality of playing online. Because men were seen as more probable to be behind any given character, the process of determining who the "true women" were became the standard gender interrogation. Kira, a 21 -year-old SM/VW (solid man, virtual woman) veteran of several MMORPGs, declared, "People should know: the first rule of online gaming is male until proven female." Kira explained this had been true of his own experience playing female avatars (he never claimed to be a women, but usually played female avatars). He was generally assumed to be a male player, and when asked about his solid world gender, he eagerly identified as a man in order to not be criticized.

Women Don't Play Men

In addition to assuming most players in the game were men, it was generally understood that *if* a player were a woman, she would *not* be controlling a male avatar. This was in part due to the norm/expectation of hyper -resonance play and women were remarkably more consistent than men in creating a same-sexed avatar (Yee 2009). Edea a 41-year-old SW/VW *FFXI* and *WoW* player, wrote:

> I'm always female, because I am in real life, haha, and I like cats so in *FFXI* I love Mithra, on *WoW* I'm all different toons. I had a mule that was male, but didn't like it

> much, I mean I don't like to pretend I'm a different gender than I really am, even though I'm really not a cat woman, ha.

Edea's sentiment that players should not "pretend" to be a different gender resonated with nearly every interviewee and most discussions in game. Edea only created a single male avatar and only as a mule (one which she later deleted). Similarly, Ivy a 22-year-old SW/VW *WoW* player, wrote:

> Hmm, that is an interesting question! Not sure, I guess I think it's interesting with regards to the genders people choose. I see a lot of guys playing female characters but not vice versa. I guess I choose female characters because I can relate to them more? That sounds silly, ha. I don't play in the role-playing sense. My characters are just an avatar for me playing the game, so I guess I naturally gravitate towards making one that is my own gender.

Ivy confirmed that men were far more likely to "switch" and play female avatars, where women were not known to play male avatars (Yee 2009). This meant that when players attempted to filter through the avatars in the virtual world seeking "real women" that male avatars were generally disqualified because they were highly unlikely to be solid women.

CLAIMING SOLID WOMAN

Because male avatars were disqualified as possible evidence of being solid world women, players sifted through the female avatars of the virtual world to find real women gamers. First, players controlling female avatars were questioned or decided on their own to claim a solid world gender. Men controlling female avatars did this in order to demonstrate they were not trying to "trick" anyone in the game world, and women controlling female avatars did this

because they desired for other players to believe they were “really women.”

Inquiring about Solid World Status

As argued above, male avatars were given default male gender in the solid world. Players rarely even inquired whether this taken-for-granted assumption was true, as Arthur, a 31-year-old SM/VM, wrote:

> No, never been asked. I guess like me, most assume that anyone playing a male character (and most female characters) are male. I assume in *FFXI* that any elvaan, hume, or mithra female character is still being played by a male until told otherwise.

Conversely, female avatars were almost always asked about their solid world gender like Mia, a 27-year-old SW/VW *GW* player, “[they ask] because they don’t believe I’m really a girl and when I state I am, they still don’t. Comments like I’m some perv with a chick char, or some such, or I’m some kid.” Female avatars were not only asked, but treated with suspicion. Lavi a 22-year-old SW/VW and long-time *FFXI* player, resonated: “Girls probably get accepted into things easier, and are given more handouts, but sometimes, I felt like we weren't as trusted because there was always that possibility of me being a guy playing a girl.”

Women were treated differently in the virtual world. Because of this, both men and women held a stake in ensuring that claims to being a woman were accurate. This meant that women controlling female avatars not only had to claim openly to be women when asked, but were continually scrutinized as they played. Asgard, an 18-year-old SM/VM *FFXI* player, wrote:

> Strangely enough, I remember confusing girls with guys and guys with girls because they weren’t playing the "correct gender." I guess I tried to evaluate their behavior online. Sometimes I feel like I can tell if they're a girl (not all the time) with the way they use their smiley faces, or, I don’t know. The names hint sometimes.

This meant that women were constantly being held accountable for the gender behavior (West and Zimmerman 1987). In contrast, virtual men were granted a default male status without proof. In part, this meant simply choosing a male avatar was evidence enough of being a solid world man. Alternatively, those who created female avatars were either expected to openly disclose that they were men (which would not be questioned, although the motivations for avatar selection were scrutinized) or seek to prove to be women (both through doing femininity and providing solid world evidence).

Proving Solid Woman

Most players believed that a feminine performance could be faked and shared grandiose stories of performances that had deceived everyone, including romantic partners, guild members, and friends. The script of what appeared to be "emphasized femininity" (Connell 1987, 1995) was, after all, something anyone could attempt in a virtual world through a female avatar. Being "flirtatious," "talking like a woman," or acting "coy and innocent," although perceived as "feminine," were not enough evidence for most players to award someone a solid woman status (although these performances should be questioned as to whether they could serve as markers of gender at all). Women were continually treated as suspect until they produced more suitable "proof" that they were really women. Penelo, a 22-year-old SW/VW *FFXI* player, wrote:

> Yeah, a couple of times I got, "Oh you're a girl?" in response to things I said, and then I got questions about it. But maybe only once had somebody ask, "Who in here (in ls) is a girl IRL." But I think for me, I kind of felt like people automatically thought girl characters were boys, and I didn't want to be a boy in people's minds so I was pretty verbal about being a woman. Blatantly, when I saw an opportunity in conversation to say I had a boyfriend (therefore provoking questions) or simply saying, "Hey I'm a girl

also"… I pretty much had to "prove" I was female. I put my picture on ffxiplayers.com (where people have their picture with their avatar name on their server option) so people could see.

Two believable pieces of evidence of being a woman were claims of desire for men (Rich 1980) and producing a verifiable picture. First, most players assumed that men, even though they might masquerade as female avatars, would be unlikely to express solid world gay desire as it exists in opposition to modern masculinity (Kimmel 2003; Pascoe 2005; Pharr 1997; Rich 1980). The first element of this paradoxical standard held that a "faker" was less likely to claim to have a boyfriend or husband than a real woman would be (Pharr 1997; Rich 1980). The "faggot" label (Pascoe 2005) in the virtual world was deployed as a means of controlling men from playing with gender (although the specific word deployed was more commonly "homo" than "fag"). This highlighted that men believed being considered "gay" was "lower" than being feminine (although both are assimilated into expelled and subordinate masculinities, see Connell 1987, 1995; Kimmel 2003). To deceive others about gender was less problematic than to deceive others into having sexual and romantic (read: gay) interactions. Ironically, the actual "trouble" with both was how the two were assumed to be conflated and that men "playing with gender" or "doing femininity" were all assumed to desire other men (a desire which is cast as feminine and therefore un-masculine, see Connell 1995; Kimmel 2003; Rich 1980).

Secondly, a picture was often "proof enough" of being a woman. Before it was shut-down, FFXIPlayers.com posted hundreds of players' "real world faces" by encouraging them to take a picture of themselves with the phrase "rpgfaces" in the picture. Although arguably this phrase could be photo shopped, these pictures were seen as more believable than a picture with no proof of date. For example, the following conversation occurred in guild chat:

Player A: Nice pic on the site there Players B

Player B: thnx

Player C: Player B when the hell was that pic taken? That coke label is way old, you have to be like what 40 or 50 now?

Player D: yea I don't think you're that hot

Player E: Guys leave Player B alone

Player C: w/e she prolly isn't even a girl (*From author's fieldnotes*)

Players in guilds were often encouraged to share their "real life identities" on guild-specific websites. This included submitting photos and creating profiles. Some players attempting to fabricate a woman solid world gender (like Player B, who was eventually "caught" and booted from the guild for pretending to be a woman) produced pictures because their performance online was not enough to convince players. However, this evidence was also scrutinized, as with Player B who had copied a photo from an old yearbook, which was later discovered by a guild member on the internet.

Other "proofs of sex" included phone calls or the typical golden standard, voice chat. Because of this ongoing and sometimes relentless scrutiny, woman often felt frustrated that they were not trusted by other players. Edea wrote:

> All the time and I tell them I'm female, I even made a myspace just to prove it…there was this one kid…she kept telling me that I was a guy, and that bothered me for some reason so I decided to make a myspace and told her to go look and there I am. It was silly but at the time I liked it…the gaming world is definitely dominated by male players. And when a female player comes in they flock to her like flies on, you know, well a guy will bend over backwards for a female character, but male to male not so much.

One remarkable difference in the virtual world is that femininity must be proven. In the solid world, femininity, in contrast to masculinity, has been considered more flexible. Women are less compulsive in having to prove femininity because is it arguable more stable and incorporates greater "range" of behaviors (Chodorow 1995; Connell 1987). Masculinity has been considered more fragile, unstable, and something that men have to continually prove throughout the life course (Capraro 2000, Chodorow 1995, Kimmel 2003, Lyman 1987).

In this male-dominated space (Kendall 2002) of MMORPGs, women were continuously questioned about their gender. However, this was not because women experienced their own femininity as unstable (although some experienced this erosion after repeated inquiries), but because men were attempting to express forms of masculinity predicated on reifying differences between men and women, while embracing heterosexual desire (Connell 1987, 1995; Kimmel 2003). In other words, solid men were compulsive about ensuring they were not "fooled" into assisting, dating, or cybering "fake" women. Bowman, a 24-year-old *FFXIV* player shared this story:

> Anytime I hear a "woman" in game talking like that [speaking of a guild member] it reminds me of this dude who played *FFXI* from day one as a chick. He cybered with guys to get gear, stole his roommate's picture to send to guys, sent it to everyone, and btw she [speaking of the roommate] was hot lol. So then, he had this girl that was a lesbian in our LS believing he was a dyke to get stuff from her, but she started to get suspicious like he just didn't know enough to fool her I guess. Well, the roommate eventually caught on when she found her picture somewhere online. He had basically stolen her identity, used her credit card to pay for his account. Like this guy went all out to pretend to be a chick. When she started putting the pieces together this guy had been doing thing shit for

years.

Even more intriguing than the story Bowman shared was that he shared a similar version of the story with members of the LS. In fact, Bowman routinely told the story or joked about the story with other players especially when "women" were claiming their identity as women. The sharing of such an elaborate hoax forced men to remain suspicious. Although some women met the ridiculous standards imposed upon them, the practice of sharing these phenomenal narratives of deceit informed women and reminded men that a "solid woman" status was never truly obtainable because, after all, there was a chance that the player could really be a man, who had stolen credit cards, created fake accounts, used someone else's photos, and performed this charade for years without being caught.

REJECTING "SOLID WOMAN"

Due to players carefully monitoring and filtering the avatar population for real women, men attempting to pass as women were often confronted and ostracized. Men marshaled different reasons for desiring to play female characters. Some claimed they enjoyed taking on a different gender or personality than their solid world status, while others claimed to enjoy deceiving players and reaping the benefits of being treated like a woman. However, consequences for deceit were high, and characters were often "publically" chastised in the game and sometimes forced to quit or move servers.

Experimenters and Deceivers

Those players who enjoyed being "experimental" often discussed either aesthetic or personality motives for taking on a different gender while playing a MMORPG. Laike, a 31-year-old SM/VW explained:

> There are a few [motivations]. There's the obvious, aesthetic reason, that as a heterosexual I find women more pleasant to look at than I do men. From a role-playing perspective, well, I have better names for female characters anyhow, and there's something I find interesting about assuming the role of a female. Not, mind you, with the intention of trying to fool anyone, but just the idea of assuming a feminine mentality. I would probably liken that to say, writing a story with a protagonist of opposite gender. Trying to get into someone else's head that is clearly quite different than yourself.

Men controlling female avatars walked a tightrope of attempting to remain "men" (read: heterosexual). As long as SM/VWs were open about their real life gender, they were excused for their lack of solid-to-virtual world gender consistency (although some players claimed it was "gay" to play a female avatar if the player was a man no matter the justification). Most open SM/VWs claimed they eroticized their female avatars, which they marshaled as evidence of their expected heterosexuality (Kimmel 2003; Rich 1980), and they deployed this as a justification for their avatar choice.

Additionally, some men donned a woman identity for the fun of deceiving others, such as Beck, a 23-year-old SM/VW *FFXI* player:

> Yeah, a couple of times just for the hell of it. It's cruel, I know, but letting some little teenager think he's hitting on a girl is so much fun up until they start stalking you. But then there is the whole role-play factor, sometimes it is just more fun to play the innocent kitty healer. I suppose there is no way to tell. If people do it, then that's their choice. I don't know it takes a fair bit of effort to maintain something like that.

While admitting playing with gender was fun and part of the online gaming experience, because players were constantly assessing claims to the "female gamer" status, gender switching for men

was difficult and required a great amount of effort. However, when possible, some men used the game and their relationships with other men to discard gender conventions. Beck discussed his closest male friend:

> Yeah he is, I think he's straight, but damn, there have been some tells when I'd have to question that [laughs], but we like to tease each other and some conversations get really ridiculous. There is a line and he likes to cross it, but it's hard for someone to make me feel uncomfortable when there is usually an ocean between me and them and the fact that no one really knows who someone is due to all they see is the character name and the avatar you play under.

Beck and his closest in-game male friend, Fuma, were able to dispose of the homophobic pose of masculinity (Kimmel 2003; Pascoe 2005) and flirt with each other in-game. This "taboo" was more easily circumvented in some pockets of the virtual world than it would have been if Beck and Fuma were negotiating a solid world friendship.

Faker Fears

Conversely, many men's "fear" was the possibility of consummating or pursuing an in-game relationship with a SM/VW pretending to be a solid woman. Cautionary stories were often shared among social circles and guilds that served to remind men to be vigilant in their assessments of possible "fakers":

> Jackfrost: Dragon is really a 13-year-old boy
>
> Player A: wait what?
>
> Jackfrost: I was talking to "her" on AIM and her "mom" got on and said she was really a he and was sick in the head.
>
> Player B: weren't you dating?

Jackfrost: …

Player C: is the gay boy still in the LS?

Jackfrost: I broke his shell[9] (*From author's fieldnotes*)

Dragon, who had been playing a female avatar, had been "dating" another guild member, Jackfrost, a 23-year-old SM/VM. Dragon had managed to convince some of the guild members s/he was a woman, however suspicion continued to mount until the event over AIM (AOL Inc. [formerly America Online] Instant Messager). Jackfrost quickly moved to expel Dragon from the guild, and subsequently inform everyone that Dragon was "really" a boy. Though there was no evidence of Dragon's gender status, Jackfrost assumed "damage control" for his gender and sexuality by booting Dragon and attempting to defame her/him in the virtual world.

Many players chastised "gender fakers" openly in general or public (sometimes shout) chat. This occasionally led to players having to switch servers, change avatar names, or quit entirely as Cerberus, a 21-year-old SM/VW explained:

> A few occasions there was a man posing as a female and when people found out it was disturbing and they were pretty much outcast and forced to quit haha…another poser was discovered when another girl was questioning them one day and asked about periods and other girl stuff, which they knew nothing about. They closed up and disappeared haha, embarrassed no doubt, there was ridicule, mostly just bringing it up over and over constantly reminding everyone about it.

Although players found fakers "disturbing" and almost always used the fag discourse to control and expel them from the community (Pascoe 2005), both men and women players also

[9] Jackfrost was the linkshell (guild) leader and breaking a "shell" or "pearl" (somewhat interchangeable names for the item that allowed access to the linkshell chat) was akin to being "booted" from the linkshell (guild).

understood that some fakers were in it for the benefits of being treated like women: the money, the assistance, the access to bigger battles and better equipment (discussed in Chapter 5). This meant that continuing to uphold separate standards in the treatment of women and men contributed to the prevalence of those attempting to pass as virtual women. Furthermore, by attempting to police gender authenticity and uphold hyper-resonance, men were subtly acknowledging that romantic relationships between two men (though scripted as "heterosexual" relationships between a VM and a VW) were incredibly common, believable, and enjoyable. In other words, heterosexual identified men were assuming that gender behavior (femininity in the virtual world) was congruent with sex category (being a solid world woman) and acting on their gender-behavior-dependent-desire (West and Zimmerman 1987). Men who exposed their in-game romantic partners as other men scrambled to reaffirm their own gender by "invoking the fag" (Pascoe 2005: 130) and labeling their once romantic partners while simultaneously recovering their compulsive sexual identity (Kimmel 2003; Pharr 1997; Rich 1980).

The consequence of these "Manthra Tales" undermined the bonds between players and upheld the gender/sexuality assumptions of the solid world through virtual interactions (Connell 1987, 1995; Jeffreys 1996; Kimmel 2003; Pharr 1997; Rich 1980). Women were constantly negotiating the suspicion that they might be faking their gender, and men were encouraged to remain authentic and consistent in their solid-to-virtual world identity. Although men could and did select female avatars (Yee 2009), choosing male avatars was seen as the "safer" choice that needed no explanation. Vincent, a 23-year-old *FFXI* and *WoW* player said:

> I made a mithra thief for fun when I started. She was in Windy and I just wanted to see how the story was from that side, but the first character I met outside the gate was like "Wanna group?" He was a male Tarutaru and was very nice as we beat up the mandys

> and mobs around the gate, but then he asked if I was really a girl. I kind of felt awkward saying "Um no" like I was trying to deceive him or something. I figured if I just played male characters no one would ask.

The consequences of reinforcing consistency in solid-to-virtual world identity and hyper-resonance served to limit players from experimenting with gender. Players deployed these cautionary tales as a subtle means to discourage others from creating different gendered avatars. Men felt they had to justify different gender avatars, or at least be open about being men in the solid world, while women had to continually reaffirm their gender to assuage a male-dominated sphere.

Hybrids and Fusers

"A rule is best preserved in its infractions. And a structure, a system of practices, is most readily defined, not by what is central to it, but by what is apparently marginal to it" (Lancaster 1995: 152). If maintaining the rigidity and hegemony of a binary gender system, and the assumed differences between women and men was at the center of the virtual world, then the "hybrids" and "fusers" were on the margins. Remarkably few spaces and interactions embraced gender as fluid and variable. However, I met Snow, a 22-year-old *WoW* player who identified as someone "oscillating" in the gender binary who claimed to be "male-bodied" and "straight, but that's because I'm picky with guys and only been sexual with one." Snow wrote:

> In the real world, I am a big guy, big features, and muscles. But I have never felt "manly." I enjoyed things like painting my fingernails, and playing with my hair growing up. Joining the Fusion guild was great because everyone seems fairly open-minded. I just hate "manly" and I don't feel I could dress feminine because I'm a big dude, big boned, broad build, but I feel so beautiful when I have fingernail polish on, especially colors like

metallic blue, and smelling girly makes me feel good.

The Fusion guild was a GLBT friendly guild that struggled to maintain its presence in the virtual world. The guild and its members (particularly the guild leader) were consistently harassed while playing the game. I joined the guild where I met Snow and later, Lightning, a 20-year-old who identified as a "lover of women virtual and real." Snow was the first player to ask me (as well as other players) "How do you see your gender?" rather than "Are you a guy or girl irl?"

The recognition of gender as dynamic and fluid by Snow and Lightning as well as some other members of the Fusion guild allowed for more varied interpretations of virtual and solid world gender. "Hybrids" like Snow used their avatar choice to create *synthesized* gender identities. Snow was neither distinctly a man nor a woman as Snow played both genders in the virtual world and claimed different solid world statuses as well. Avatars were more akin to costumes for gender, and allowed opportunities to expand or hold multiple gender identities. Additionally, "Fusers" like Lightning used their avatars to remain consistent, but attempted to broaden the attributes of their gender. In other words, fusers did not switch gender in avatar creation, but instead attempted to perform (traditionally) opposite gendered attributes. Lightning, who wrote she was "shy in real life" and a "self-identified lesbian," used her female avatar to be more assertive and "skirt-chase" other female avatars "like a man would." Although rare, and clearly the exception, the Fusion guild attempted to create a safe space for players who were GLBT identified as well as those who had more fluid conceptions of gender.

CONCLUSION

Consistency in solid-to-virtual world gender identity allows the gaming world and the players within it to use solid world constructions of gender in their virtual world interactions.

The consequences of marshalling a gender authenticity norm, however, contributes to the perceived differences between women and men in several important ways. First, maleness is taken-for-granted in the virtual world. Virtual men are never asked to prove their solid world gender (that is, the existence of their male bodies) because of pervasive stereotypes that present online gaming as a male-dominated space. Men thus draw on a complicit patriarchal dividend that conflates their gender with an assumed mastery of gaming, and furthermore technology (Kendall 2000, 2002; Lorber 1993).

The deceptive lack of importance on men's solid world status might be ideal for creating a space for playing with gender because the physical body, which has been a hub of gender identity (Messerschmidt 2007), is seemingly ignored, but the standards are different for women (Bordo 1993). Thus, men are encouraged to remain consistent in their solid-to-virtual world gender identity, or to disclose openly that they are men controlling female avatars. This inhibits many men from playing certain avatars, or forces them to feel they need to justify choosing female avatars. These justifications conform to rigid constructions of masculinities that mandate expression of heterosexual desire and cast female avatars as objects of that desire (Connell 1995; Hollyway 1984; Jeffreys 1996; Kimmel 2003; Rhode 1997; Rich 1980).

Second, women have to prove they are women. Women are often not trusted because they are seen as being potential "fakers." Because men perceive women as possible romantic partners, women are required to prove their gender. However, desire is largely a gamble predicated on the assumption of congruence between gender and sex (West and Zimmerman 1987), which has been reinforced through emergent sexual identities (Gamson 1995; Katz 1990), and this becomes apparent in MMORPG romances. This buttresses the importance of the inclusion of sexuality in furthering an equality imperative. Although the limitations of a

sexuality-centered emancipation have been highlighted (Wilkins 2004), at least some of the problem lay in desire that pushes men to create distance and objectify women when there could be equality and "power-with" sexuality, as well as desire in which women internalize their value in relation to men and as their capacity to be objects of desire and not equal partners (Hollway 1984; Weinberg and Biernbaum 1993, Wilkins 2004). Implicit in this vetting process, however, is the reality that online relationships (and ideally, any relationship) *can* circumvent gender and perhaps more importantly gendered power. The compulsive labeling of "real women gamers" (Rich 1980) based on solid world proof serves as evidence of how virtual worlds do blur gender and allow *anyone* to pursue *anyone* romantically. This is acknowledged in that men can be "fooled" into relationships with other men (presenting themselves as women) highlighting the persistent assumption that desire must have gendered character (Connell 1995).

Finally, although fusers and hybrids exist, those players who afford themselves flexibility face bifurcation in the game design (i.e., only female and male avatar options) as well as segregation into "exceptional" spaces such as RP servers or marginalized guilds on regular servers (e.g, the Fusion guild). Similarly, "third" categories in the solid world, such as transgender face the issue of attempting to deconstruct gender, but in doing so may only buttress the existing system and grant themselves a marginal and ephemeral place in the dominant culture (Gamson 1995; Jeffreys 1996). Similarly, MMORPG players largely deny the possibilities of fluid gender play and marshal a consistency and authenticity norm that curtails imagination.

CHAPTER 5

THE GODDESS PARADOX: HYPER-WOMEN PLAYING GAMES

When I began playing Final Fantasy XI, I created two avatars, both "Hume," serving the nation of Bastok, but one was a female avatar and one was a male avatar. As I foraged through the virtual world casually switching between avatars, attempting to level them equally, I took notice of how the players treated me. As "Reimi," finding parties was easier, getting help with my sub-job quest was simple (completed in one night), and a Tarutaru Black Mage I met in Valkrum Dunes even gave me 5,000 gil, which I was not expected to pay back. As "Edge," the game was more difficult. Parties were harder to come by, and less likely to last. The subjob quest took days to complete, and no one offered to hand me free gil. (From author's field notes)

The classic role playing game (RPG) *Lunar: Silver Star Story* weaves the tale of the reincarnation of goddess Althena into the talented, beautiful songstress Luna and the quest of dragonmaster hopeful Alex's journey to save her. Goddesses in the fantasy genre have been both idolized and infantilized. Despite Luna's heritage and seemingly endless power, she is merely a fragile girl who is kidnapped by the Magic Emperor and used as a sexualized pawn. Only Alex's heroic quest and his assumedly chaste love will save Luna and allow her to simply live life as a normal girl. Similarly, women who play MMORPGs are confronted with a paradoxical gender experience. Research on gender has often highlighted paradoxical attributes to how people experience their gender such as men feeling powerless as individuals though they are powerful as a social category (Capraro 2000; Kimmel 2003; Lorber 1994). Although the solid world may seem to diminish in importance within the virtual world, players ardently carryover their solid

world statuses into virtual spaces. As with other realms that marshal an almost prophetic bluster to rewrite how gender *could* be done, gaming worlds are similarly problematic. MMORPGs and the players within them continue to (re)produce the rigid gender dichotomy despite the potential for new layers of flexibility. In doing so, women who participate in these virtual spaces are treated as the male-dominated space dictates (Kendall 2000, 2002; Nardi 2010). Women are welcome exceptions, treated warmly, assisted openly, and befriended readily. And yet, at the same time, they are seen more as potential romantic and sexual partners than as players, and as such they are also harassed, infantilized, and never fully embraced as gamers.

Taylor (2006) argues that MMORPGs have created deep and meaningful experiences for women gamers. MMORPGs, although constrained by the "gamer" (read: male) stereotype and market demographics (Dovey and Kennedy 2007), appeal to women players for a multitude of reasons. According to Taylor (2006), women gamers are drawn to aspects of power and status, identity play, multifaceted social immersion, and game mastery. These experiences can be inhibited by avatar design, which reinforces idealized (and sexualized) female bodies (Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006). Although women gamers experience various degrees of virtual success, the gender identities they perform and their interactions within virtual worlds can alter their experiences of and their access to that success.

Negotiating gender in these virtual spaces is a process embedded in a history which wove gender and technology into a predominately male tapestry (Kendall 2000, 2002; Lorber 1993). Because gaming continues to be presented as a male space, the existence of "real women" in such spaces is clearly labeled as exceptional. Players (men and women) seek to establish those claiming to be women as "female-bodied." They believe both that they can assume body from behavior, meaning a gendered body behaves in respect to said body, thus through recognizing

behavior one can assume the correlating body (Kendall 2000), and that gender is always congruent with sex (i.e., socially agreed upon criteria which categorize a person as female, see West and Zimmerman 1987). Women are thus challenged to reinforce these assumptions in game worlds, establishing themselves as women by marshaling evidence of their solid world gender (for example, voice chat with other players or providing photographs as verification). In contrast, men need not prove to be male-bodied. Embodied gender theory (Messerschidt 2007) argues that the norms for striking balance between sex appearance and gendered behavior vary in different contexts and are enforced by those with power in those contexts, but that men and women's bodies often carry different meanings or are given different weight in the same context. MMORPG worlds treat men's (solid world) bodies as given (though invisible) so long as men's gendered behavior is normative and appropriate. Women's (solid world) bodies, however, are imperative to establishing the authenticity of their gendered behavior, and furthermore their gender identity (again, the body is not always a requirement but a correlate of what players assume to equal a female body such as a "feminine voice" heard through voice chat in game allows players to assume the gender-sex link).

Since game worlds arguably marshal a norm of authenticity, playing the game demands players to be transparent about their solid worlds statuses (hyper-resonant). In doing so, the virtual world loses the potential for gender flexibility and, in turn, attempts to reinforce gender assumptions within this ethereal realm. Players explain that gender is paramount to how a person is treated within the game, and reason that the process of identifying "real women" is in effect to be able to treat the respective genders as they should be treated in the virtual world. The consequences for women who "prove" to be female-bodied ironically grants them sexual and romantic power over men, while allowing (if not encouraging) men to infantilize women within

the game as inferior players, what I call the goddess paradox. This concept not only requires that women's (proclaimed) bodies be the conduit of both their empowerment and disempowerment, but that both come as a consequence of a form of masculinity that mandates "heterosexual desire" (Jeffreys 1996). This adheres to tenants of social exchange theory which holds that women gamers become invested in proving their gender to access rewards from men (Blau 1964; Hommans 1958) while simultaneously reinforcing more traditional gender roles and identities of both the men and women in recreating interactional expectations between genders (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Rhode 1997; Ridgeway 1997; Riseman 1998; West and Zimmerman 1987; Wharton 2008).

REWARDING SOLID WOMEN

Players who managed to "prove" to be women (that is, they were believed to be and accepted as women) were confronted with significantly different gaming experiences than those assumed to be men. Although the reasoning and process for "proving" gender was discussed in Chapter 4, the following discussion centers on the experiences and perceptions of those players who *were* accepted as "real" women. Part of the reality in this male dominated space was that "real women gamers" were welcome "exceptions" to the virtual world and were treated as such. Women gamers were afforded benefits which included in-game assistance, money, parties, friends, attention and conversation, and "nicer" treatment. However, they had to negotiate a number of detriments which included unwanted romantic and sexual advances, perceptions of lackluster gaming ability, and encapsulated roles.

HYPER-RESONANCE SHAPING GENDER

Paradigms of play among gamers are as varied as the players themselves. However, players largely follow the hyper-resonance (hyper for short) form when playing online, holding players responsible for being authentic and genuine in their interactions. Hypers maintain far more consistency in their solid-to-virtual world identities. This is the "be yourself" approach that has become an almost inarguable standard in online worlds as they continue to grow into the mainstream. Hypers believe in gender authenticity and consistency, and denounce "gender flexibility." Hypers believe adhering to transparency of social categories to be the more "honest" form of playing online. When players openly acknowledge this standard, gender play (or gender bending) is cast out. The solid world is in effect transposed upon the virtual with little disturbance. Those adhering to a different approach (e.g., RPers or damps) are less concerned with solid-to-virtual consistency and transparency (albeit this is contestable) and are not at the center of this discussion.

Hypers enjoy creating avatars as "extensions" of themselves as opposed to "new personae" as Penelo wrote:

> Always my same gender. Well I guess when I make a character (when I made Penelo) I want her to look as much like me as possible in terms of both physical and feelings. So I picked a Tarutaru because I felt like in real life I was cute and cuddly so I made her with brown hair and as short as possible to resemble me physically, an extension of myself in game. I don't think I could identify with a guy character who looked nothing like me. I like being my character not just HAVING a character.

Again, it is important to reiterate that hypers acknowledge the presence of difference between themselves and their avatars (they know, for example, that they are not elves), but remain

consistent in presentation of themselves (their avatar is more of a "funnel" for their solid world identities and not a "barrier" preventing others from knowing their solid world selves). Hypers in no way attempt to take-on new gender personae or identities in the virtual world and, possibly just as important, they hold other players to this same standard. As noted earlier, this standard has become increasingly rooted in the MMORPG experience as these games have attracted more and more players. Ivy explained:

> I think people's interactions on *WoW* are just a microcosm of real-life interactions because the game is more mainstream than others. I think in other MMORPGs it might be easier to adopt the role-play attitude and treat characters based on the character's gender rather than the person's gender because they appeal more to a subset of people who are dedicated to the role-play thing and keeping in-character is one of the things role-play is about. Since *WoW* has such a huge variety of people playing it, I think it's going to be more like any social situation where your actual gender can determine how you interact with someone.

Ivy's sentiment highlights several aspects of the modern MMORPG experience. First, that approaches to play possibly vary by game (or by server). However, she also explains that the non-hypers are a "subset" of people. In other words, the hyper approach, that is, the non-RP, "just like real life," "authentic extension" approach is the preferred and more popular approach to gaming online. Because of this, solid world gender is required to be as transparent as possible. Players openly acknowledge difference in treatment by gender, and marshal that the difference in treatment is part of the reason why players *should* ascribe to the hyper approach which demands they disclose, or better yet, remain consistent in gender-of-avatar choice as it should be congruent with their solid world gender. This, in turn, limits players from broadening the gender

spectrum. As previously discussed in Chapter 4, because the rigid gender binary is readily enforced and is coupled with an authenticity norm those desiring to embody alternative gender identities are largely relegated to "exceptional spaces" in virtual worlds such as servers or guilds dedicated to (or, at least accepting of) RP and gender play.

REAPING BENEFITS

Superficially, it seemed that women gamers experienced a number of benefits when they choose to participate *as women* in the virtual world. This meant that these women were seen as women in the eyes of other players. Once the status was in place, "hyper-women" (women who had revealed their gender and were also player-to-avatar gender consistent) were then coveted for their "rarity," regardless of evidence that suggests 40% of all gamers (broadly defined) are women (McGonigal 2011). The treatment of these women as exceptional was further evidence that the gamer social category continued to be anchored to the assumption that gamers were all men.

Treating Women as Women

Both men and women reported that players were treated differently in game on the basis of gender. Laike, wrote:

> For whatever reasons or motivations, I think a lot of males treat females preferentially. I usually see this in guild settings, where people see or talk to each other on a frequent basis. Sometimes there will be a particular person that won't be denied any requests for help, or will always be provided with money or items as desired.

Gin, a 24-year-old SM/VM stated:

> Without a doubt. If a female player lets on that she is, she'll tend to get more attention. I

know of some female players that make male characters to avoid that. Other players may come to them more readily to help them or will come on to them more often.

Hyper-women were treated as exceptional in the virtual world. Gaming culture has continued to be cited and perceived as a male-dominated pastime despite more recent shifts (Chatfield 2010; McGonigal 2011). However, the accuracy of this claim (i.e., whether more men than women played these games) was not as important as how the perception of that reality (i.e., believing women were rare) framed the experiences of women who chose to participate in these games.

Perceived as exceptions, hyper-women accessed a novelty status that granted them "special" treatment. Since the perception of this treatment superficially seems to provide a number of benefits to women gamers, hyper-women became invested in ensuring they could access their novelty status. Because of this, women were invested in proving they were women to increase their chances of in-game success. Penelo wrote:

> To be honest I think I was way better off being female in people's eyes because men are taught to always help women and be chivalrous that was sooooo apparent in game I mean as long as I was nice to male characters in game if I said I *really* needed help or I *really* had no money, they would take me places and help me or buy me things, sounds devious, but it was *awesome.* Meanwhile, my boyfriend was always having to beg people for help, so I felt lucky but it's not like it was exploitive to me, I was fine with having pic up [posted online] and people being super nice to me and the guy players got to feel helpful win win right? Hahahaha.

Women playing virtual games were empowered over men with (if nothing else) the ability to obtain more help in-game in the form of other players (mostly men) providing gifts (money, equipment) or assisting them with their virtual exploits (e.g., killing monsters, experience parties,

questing, and so on). Penelo compared her experience playing the game with her boyfriend's experience highlighting that he was far less likely to obtain the assistance required to complete some elements of the game (or that it took considerable effort on his part to receive the same level of help as Penelo received). She continued:

> Well for example, for my white mage spells I had to do these really hard quests or pay a crap load of money to get them, but once I complained enough (not annoying...just disappointed...) people bought them for me lol.....whereas I remember my bf working his ass off to get things like AF done and get certain quests done. So yeah, it was advantageous to be a female in my opinion (as long as you were REALLY female) cause if you said it and couldn't prove it you were as good as dog chow.

Penelo cited two realities of in-game play that were important to accessing this "preferential" treatment. First, she, as well as other women, was required to prove she was a woman. Second, she almost consciously performed a "damsel in distress" or emphasized femininity (Connell 1987, 1995) in order to solicit assistance. In contrast, men in game worlds are expected to be proficient, if not masters, because the stereotype of the (male) gamer disallows men from receiving the same amount of help (although temporarily, many gamers can claim a "noob" status that, while stigmatized, can be deployed as an adequate excuse for lack of game mastery). This did not disqualify women from more active and even powerful roles, but presented the performance and adherence to a submissive femininity as a "path of least resistance" and generally what was expected (Connell 1987, 1995; Johnson 1997).

Although it is arguable whether this "better" treatment is completely positive, in MMORPGs, where progress and status in the game are unavoidably linked to forming relationships and cooperative play, being a hyper-woman seemed advantageous. Being able to

obtain more assistance in-game allowed hyper-women to excel in meeting their in-game goals (e.g., completing missions, felling infamous monsters, or obtaining valuable equipment). This meant that hyper-women were encouraged to perform an emphasized femininity (Connell 1987, 1995; Johnson 1997) in the virtual world, which allowed men access to forms of masculinity that embodied a brand of "virtual chivalry." This symbolic reconstruction of an eroticized "heterosexual desire" reified already problematic gender power differences in these new virtual spaces (Connell 1987, 1995; Jeffreys 1996; Johnson 1997; Kendall 2000, 2002).

Streamlining Game Mastery

After extensive time in-game, most players cited their virtual accomplishments as evidence of their game mastery (e.g., possessing certain items or equipment, participation in difficult battles, completion of particular quests, titles, level of their crafts, classes, or skills). Because the perception among players was that hyper-women were helped more often, some men lambasted the women's approach to playing the game as did Vincent:

> I think females get helped more. I had this guildie that was playing a female character who was "dating" a male character in the guild. She basically used him and made him help her by playing the "oh noes I can't do it myself" act. He helped her get drops, claim NMs, do the missions, do her AF quests, EVERYTHING (yells). I literally had to beg for assistance with anything I couldn't solo, which in *FFXI* is almost everything. I think female characters have it easy because they are seen as potential girlfriends to all the gamers out there.

Feeling threatened, some men (and women) lash out at hyper-women for "using" male players to meet their in-game goals. Many players like Ryuk, a 21-year-old SM/VM *FFXI* player, commented that men who "couldn't get any in real life" were seen as "coming to the aid of"

women who could possibly become romantic partners.

These "benefits" allowed women to make faster and easier progress in terms of game mastery. Interestingly, men who perceived hyper-women as receiving more assistance attacked the men who were providing the assistance and largely ignored that part of the problem lay in men *not being helped* and *not helping* other men. Coincidentally, some hyper-women who witnessed the same disparity in treatment and assistance instead blamed the women who were accepting the preferential treatment. Freya protested:

> I do believe that men and women are treated differently in-game. Usually mentioning the fact you are female will give you a huge advantage with guys looking for a bit of E-pussy. For the record: I have not and never will exploit this, it's probably one of the most degrading and sickening things a woman can do and makes her no better than a street corner whore... A lot of the women in game do exploit this for items, gil, etc. and it sickens me that a person would lower themselves to such levels for pixels.... I would say it's an unfair advantage over men, since some men are so besotted with "women" they meet in game that they'd get them through harder missions, pretty much play the game for them if it got them somewhere... which is sad since it defeats the purpose of the game and dulls a lot of the finer points.

Some women players argued that "besotted," "love-starved," or "desperate" men were in essence ruining the game by "padding the grass" for women gamers to reach all their goals (all with intentions to pursue these women romantically or sexually, which also assumed men will not help women without compensation). Subsequently, women who were seen as "exploiting" the men were subject to criticism by other men (who struggled to obtain the same kind of support) and women (who accused them as "whoring for pixels").

Implicit in the reality of women's pseudo-empowerment over these "geek men," was that it also threatened relationships in the solid world. Some men cited feeling anxious of their partners (or other men's partners) using their "feminine appeal" to enchant the "uber dorks." Magnus, a 25-year-old, *WoW* player explained:

> That happened to a guy I know. He said he came out in the living room one night and his wife was playing, but webcaming with another guy via the PS Eye thing. I was like yep, that's why chicks shouldn't play games. Like I actually felt for that guy...It's not the playing without me thing that I care about. It's what's being SAID while playing. I could give a damn if anyone [speaking of his partner] is playing a game without me. As long as it's fucking appropriate. What I don't understand honestly, is the fucking uber dorks that go after these women....With the enormous amount of porn on the internet, and getting laid now as easy as walking outside, it doesn't make sense to me.

Though many men (and some women) couched their criticism of hyper-women's augmented game experience due to the attention lavished upon them as being "unfair" or as providing them with an "easy game mode," few acknowledged underlining threats to both claims of masculinity and femininity. In other words, men feared other men's virtual accomplishments as providing them an advantage to pursuing hyper-women (or worse, "stealing them" from their solid world partners) while women feared being forced to juggle their identities as gamers with negotiating an overzealous male (assumed) majority that would not see them as anything but potential partners.

NEGOTIATING DETRIMENTS

Despite being catered to by men in-game, hyper-women were often subjected to

continuous romantic and sexual advances. Additionally, having accepted assistance from men (or having to carry that perception) hyper-women's gaming prowess was often questioned.

Sidestepping Sexual and Romantic Advances

The constant and often invisible maintenance of unwanted advances by hyper-women was most profoundly stated by Xenobia, a 27-year-old SW/VW who wrote to me in-game about her problems with her guild members:

> So I have a 12-year-old, a 14-year-old, two 16-year-olds, and a 22-year-old who claim to be in love with me, cuz I'm "so amazing and beautiful." Do you know how much of a headache it is to try and not hurt their feelings? What the hell am I doing wrong? Why can't I play like anybody else without people falling in "love" with me? One kid told me he masturbated to the thought of me. He's the 12 year old. I felt like a CHOMO [child molester]. I told them I'm too old to be anything but a friend to them and I have a man in my life so it's not gonna happen, erg what do I do? I don't want to be mean about it, but it kind of creeps me out.

Women had to balance the perception that they were always seen as possible romantic interests, with their desires to meet gaming goals. Xenobia struggled with assisting and being assisted by guild members who lusted after her. Some women noted the sexual harassment in-game had changed their approach to playing and who they played with, remaining ever conscious of the potential consequences of engaging in romantic and sexual relationships online.

Men had also witnessed this harassment of women players. Near, a 23-year-old *WoW* player commented "I think guys can be animals towards the fairer sex. There was this one guy, he did an emote that said 'char name grabs char name's boob.' And the girl char, or so I would assume, did /no and /slap, just things like that." Arguably, to be "like anybody else" and to

circumvent such harassment was difficult for women in the virtual world and inhibited them from being considered simply gamers or "allies in play." Such romantic and sexual advances were not a "problem" for men in the games, since men did not have to justify or struggle to be perceived as *just gamers*.

Though generally men were often the source of this harassment, men could also experience this harassment firsthand in a reversed role. Men playing women (SM/VW) who were avoiding hyper-resonance play or were in the process of being screened as "real women" sometimes experienced harassment from men. Magnus related:

> There are a lot more women these days, which is good and bad. Of course, for me the women make better friends in game cuz they are less asstardy about being all badass. The women in the games are usually down for helping and shit too, and are usually really cool about loot and stuff. Playing with guys, I swear, it becomes a dick measuring contest most of the time or worse. I had one guy in *WoW*, help me because I was playing my BE [Blood Elf] Female Mage....and then afterwards ask me to cyber with him. Lol. When I told him I was a guy, he disappeared. Yea, so guys in games, a lot of them are really asstards. And like it or not, gaming is still male dominated, which means asstard overflow.

The problem with virtual spaces maintaining a hostile environment even for female avatars alone (as Magnus was not a hyper-woman) can repel many women (and some men) who might wish to play these games. Women, faced with relentless sexual advances may "roll" (i.e., choose) male avatars to avoid this problem (although this seems rare, see Yee 2009), even if they would rather play as women. Men may also avoid choosing female avatars knowing that other men may eroticize their avatars and likewise make unwarranted advances. Allowing men's behavior to

control players' choice of avatar, their choice to play the game at all, and even more importantly their experiences within the game in respect to comfort and safety obstructs the metamorphic potential that gaming, and online worlds in general, have heralded.

Lackluster Player Perception

Because assistance was (seemingly) so readily available, this often reinforced players' beliefs that women were not skilled gamers. Penelo explained: "they want to know what gender you are so they know if you 'need help' or if they can flirt with you or if they should be competing with you." Similarly, Cerberus resonated:

> Females got more [assistance] because of the idea males have that they're helpless and need the help, which is for the most part true, or maybe females are just lazy, but everyone has their strong points. I'm sure guys got help too, I've helped plenty, but I usually didn't ask for assistance.

This perception crystallized stereotypes about who "real gamers" were, which is to say, men. This arguably was very damaging because not only was the preexisting stereotype of women as poor gamers reinforced, but men's interactions with women in game worlds created a self-perpetuating system for this to remain true. In essence, men actively reinforced women's roles as non-ideal gamers by treating them as exceptional.

Women were also welcomed insofar as they were objects of desire and allowed men to execute virtual chivalry. Beck explained how he had been known to help women gamers

> I know that when I'm around a female player I tone my language down a little and am a little more helpful towards them. I actually once went so far as to get a fellow mithra Fenrir (her name was Rena in game and she was from Italy). Anyway, she was a noob SMN and wanted some tips and pointers. Instead, I got her Fenrir. I pulled a lot of

strings. I used many of my in-game contacts and friends and spent a lot of time doing that.

The extent of Beck's beneficence toward Rena changed her experience in-game. Fenrir (a powerful monster in the game) was a very difficult battle usually reserved as an end-game accomplishment (i.e., veteran players grouped together to defeat the monster in order to obtain it). *FFXI* was a "multi-class"[10] MMORPG, this meant one avatar could take-on many different classes (e.g., Paladin, White Mage, Samurai, and so on) by "switching classes" (a command in-game). Because of this, most Summoners (a class in *FFXI*) who possessed Fenrir had most likely leveled another class (for example, a Paladin) to level 75 (the level-cap at the time) and had challenged the monster with a group of powerful allies as that level 75 class. Those who had done this, were then able to play their Summoners having possession of Fenrir, and this was rather prestigious (and, in some cases, led to more party invites). However, lacking a class that would have actively participated in the fight (as in Rena's situation) highlighted that someone had completed the battle *for her* rather than she had taken an active role in the fight. This reality was commonly exposed in group settings where a player like Rena would be asked what was her "main class" (i.e., with what class did she fight Fenrir) and, lacking a class that would have been able to participate in the fight, those inquiring would understand that her Fenrir was obtained through a favor such as the one Beck eagerly provided.

Some men's preferential treatment of women was done with the best of intentions. It allowed men to perform masculinities they may have had less access to in the solid world, and it contributed to the "spirit" of these games, which embodied cooperative play and altruism (although they have a number of very competitive aspects as well). It would be misleading to

[10] For additional clarification of "multi-class" and "mono-class" MMORPGs, see the Glossary.

present all beneficent deeds towards women as overtly sexist or lustful. However, this treatment contributed to women being pushed into encapsulated roles and thus they were not fully embraced by the gaming world. Corcell wrote: "I tend to expect more out of male players than female players. I will curse out someone for doing something stupid if that person was a guy, while if it was a female player, I just shrug it off." The reality was that men did not expect women to even be capable of playing at a high level. Mia, a 27-year-old SW/VM resonated: "I think it's the same as out here (real life) too. Let's say you die, they think you are a chick…I think it's just easier to blame girls or kids, but meh…I think that guys think girls are poo." In this respect, the in-game assistance was framed as "leveling the playing field." Despite what seemed at first to be a sphere that benefited and advanced women, the latent consequences of ample assistance, hand-outs, and superficial camaraderie kept women gamers from being fully embraced in this male-dominated realm.

However, the online gaming landscape has changed over time (McGonigal 2011; Nardi 2010). As MMORPGs have flirted with the mainstream and undergone the casual revolution (spearheaded most notably by the explosive popularity of *WoW*, which has changed the player base considerably), gaming has begun to assimilate (albeit slowly) those who stretch beyond the aging stereotype of the male geek. Ivy noted her own experience changing as she continued to play *WoW*:

> I think it has gotten better over time, I remember it being a lot worse even two years ago, as the game gets more mainstream more girls play and I think that has changed it somewhat. I don't feel that I've ever been treated differently with regards to playing the game (i.e., no one has looked down on my playing skill or ability because of my gender), but in the socializing sense I think that males and females are treated differently,

interacting with others in chat, making openly sexist remarks, some of that remains. Some hyper-women stated that they felt less infantilized and sexualized by men indicating that, at least, some had experienced a change in treatment over time (either their perception of the game worlds in general or their personal sense of acceptance). This is indicative of the slightly amorphous residue of online worlds' revolutionary potential, something that has escaped the full-crystallization of hyper-resonance and yet, may also indicate the closing door to a more fluid gender realities.

CONCLUSION

Hyper-women's experiences in game worlds are anchored by the hyper-resonance approach to play that requires women to prove they are women. Women may follow through to feel they are being properly recognized by gender, or to reap the benefits afforded them in the virtual world. In either case, men may treat women with suspicion prior to proving their gender, only to infantilize them (through virtual chivalry) once they prove to be solid women. By doing so, men seek to ensure that their affections embody proper (read: heterosexual) desire. Jeffreys (1996: 75) argues: “The desire for gender is not just the desire to conform and fit in, though that has a powerful effect, but an excitement felt as sexuality in a male supremacist culture which eroticises (sic) male dominance and female submission." Women are thus pushed into forms of femininity that adhere to the existing power structure within the games, which in turn informs us about the solid social world and what is framed as desirable. Femininity that is desirable is submissive, other-object, and female-bodied (Connell 1987, 1995; Hollyway 1984; Jeffreys 1996; Kimmel 2003; Rich 1980). This has implications for relationships outside the game, as well as future virtual relationships, because it may contribute to the reproduction and persistence

of gender standards. Women's reliance and men's enforcement of a sexuality of male supremacy (Jeffreys 1996) requires the reproduction of femininity and masculinity (Connell 1987, 1995; Kimmel 2003; Pharr 1997; Rich 1980). This dysfunctional masculinity requires the fusion of a woman/object with a need to maintain a separate identity and space in which men have undisputed reign (Hollway 1984). Women are thus infantilized and sexualized whilst men maintain a space of dominance in virtual worlds, and this is a common practice of patriarchy (Connell 1995; Jeffreys 1996; Kimmel 2003; Rich 1980). In its most base form, the persistence of these standards has turned "playing games with women" into product for men's consumption exemplified by websites such as *PlayWithMe*[11] which allows (assumedly) men to pay for women to play video games with them.

The preferential treatment of women gamers by men demonstrates that men and women are indeed perceived differently in MMORPGs. Although these "benefits" may be interpreted negatively, in-game success is often predicated on accomplishing tasks that require help from others, in-game currency, "epic" equipment, and powerful allies. Many players want nothing more than to be best. They want to have the best equipment, the best guilds, the best battles, and they can accomplish this more easily by proving to be solid women, which in turn casts them as "inferior" players (i.e., their legitimacy as accomplished gamers is often questioned despite possessing markers of game mastery) and secures their access to this "preferential" treatment. These benefits change the experiences, roles, and difficulty of gaming online. Women are helped more, "handed gold like trash," and invited to battles and events more often. This contributes to women accruing status and success within the virtual world and arguably entices women to

[11] *PlayWithMe* is a website that charges fees for playing games with women. The website, accessible at: http://playwithme.com/ advertises "Play games one-on-one with smokin' hotties. Join for free to get started, then pick your favorite cutie to play with live on webcam."

explore more gaming experiences, platforms, and spaces (Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006).

Conversely, being awarded these benefits marginalizes women. Women are stereotyped as "gold-diggers" and are thus treated more as potential partners for men to woo with gifts and assistance than as *actual players*. This consequence is not founded on individual gaming ability, but on gender attributes alone (Nardi 2010). This has been illustrated in other spheres of everyday life where men misperceive their privilege as competence (or are misperceived by others) and thus continue to subordinate women (Acker 1990; Schilt 2006). The stereotype that gaming is a male-domain reinforces the belief that women cannot play, or cannot play well (Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006). This, in turn, possibly contributes to men assisting women in-game. The assumed difference is then recreated and marshaled as evidence to deny women their identity as real gamers. However, the continued success and enjoyment women experience in virtual worlds is important for changing the practices that reproduce technology and gaming as a male-arena (McGonigal 2011; Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006).

CHAPTER 6

SYNTHETIC MEN: EPEEN AS GEEK MASCULINITY

I asked a guild member if I could take part in a quest he and some friends were running within the hour. "Sure," came his reply. Then a long pause. "One green, two purple and the rest are blue," he mistelled into guild chat. "Are you telling them what I am wearing?" I asked him in response to seeing the breakdown-by-rank of my gear in guild chat. "Yea," he responded "they want to make sure I ain't dragging some gimp along with us." (From author's field notes)

Modern masculinity is dysfunctional (Capraro 2000; Connell 1995; Kimmel 2003). Scholars have traced the "evolution" (loosely applied) of masculinity over the last few hundred years arguing that the current hegemonic project is a form of "marketplace manhood" (Kimmel 2003). However, also highlighted are the many possibilities for and inevitability of men failing to meet the standard, and thus failing to be seen as masculine (Connell 1987; Kimmel 2003; Pascoe 2005). Part of the problem lays in the ephemeral status itself. "Manhood" is socially bestowed by other men rather than intrinsically attained (Capraro 2000). Additionally, there is no sense of permanence of manhood, men are in a constant struggle to be granted masculinity in an endless cycle that never allows them to stop struggling to be masculine (Kimmel 2003). Because of this, men denied the power and dominance promised by the hegemonic project have developed strategies and proxies for accessing it including intimate partner violence (Ashforth 1999; Lancaster 2006; Le Espirtu 2007) , racism (Fine et al. 1998), terrorism (Kimmel 2002), illegal drug economy (Anderson 1999) and drinking (Capraro 2000). Men formulate these strategies and operate in these ways largely because it makes men feel powerful (which they are supposed

to feel) when they are spiraling into powerlessness (which is to be avoided at all costs).

Similarly, Gerschick and Miller (1994) discuss men with disabilities as they confront issues of masculinity. They argue that some men may choose to "reformulate" attributes of hegemonic masculinity to fit their current realities (Gerschick and Miller 1994). This approach attempts to tweak the rules so that they may still be applied even if the paths to attaining certain masculine criteria are different (and possibly better). Kendall (2000, 2002) also found "nerds" attempt to reinforce certain hegemonic ideals, but create more suitable masculine pursuits that are more attainable for nerd men (e.g., being computer savvy and tech knowledge as competence). They engaged in forms of "het banter" that marginalized and sexualized women in tech communities (upholding certain staples of hegemonic masculinity), and yet they bemoaned somehow failing to meet these standards in other social spheres. Nardi (2010) highlights how game worlds in *WoW* also reinforce tenants of masculinity that often require men to cast other men as failures (emasculating them through use of homophobic language). Since gamers assume game worlds are populated by men, the "threatening specter" of "becoming the fag" (Pascoe 2005) is omnipresent and gamers seem to reinforce this by deploying homophobic and sexist banter as a way of labeling and subjugating other players.

Jace Hall, a game and television producer, created a music video titled "*I Play WoW*" that captures how men who play games have attempted to push away from the broader cultural constraints of masculinity: "Call me a nerd, call me a geek, but I'm no longer embarrassed. Say I'm socially screwed, never have kids or a marriage. I don't live my life money, fame, or chasing your carrots." The song sums up quite well the attributes of modern masculinity that men in game worlds may attempt to circumvent by embracing gaming as something that matters. After all, in the solid world, the race for success, money, and the "toys" that symbolize masculinity,

never ends (Kimmel 2003). However, this exodus from the solid world does not restructure the need for men who play games to adhere to the dominate script.

McGonigal (2011) argues that games in general are fun and engaging because they create clear goals and have rewarding feedback systems. Now players have the tools to measure progress, success, and status. Similar tools or quantifiers are nebulas at best in the solid world when men attempt to endlessly outdo one another and become the "biggest wheel" (Kimmel 2003). Because of this, what I call "geek men" or men who play MMORPGs, create their own ideal form of geek masculinity in virtual worlds allowing them to gain access to and "reformulate" (Gerschick and Miller 1994) attributes of hegemonic masculinity that have been unavailable to them or that have been denied in the social spheres of solid world life. Arguably, "gamer geeks" embody a subordinate (Connell 1995) form of masculinity (although there are variations among players, and it would be misleading to present all gamers as geek men). Interestingly, instead of rejecting attributes of hegemonic masculinity (which they may have been denied in dominant culture), this geek masculinity reformulates those attributes and creates a space to maintain male dominance as well as subordinate and sexualize women (Connell 1995; Kendall 2000, 2002; Kimmel 2003; Nardi 2010). In this way, technology and by extension, game worlds, bolstered by assumptions of men's "natural" proclivity for mathematics and spatial skills (Kendall 2000, 2002; Lorber 1993; Nardi 2010) have allowed geek men to become "real" men with all the dysfunctional qualities in tow.

This path is emboldened by how games are structured around visible cues of progress (McGonigal 2011). In MMORPGs, men measure their (masculine) gamer status through their unique currency of character status, masculinized geek work, and symbolic virtual dominance. These practices divide men in virtual worlds, ranking them, and creating a hierarchy of gamers.

In reaction to geek men who cross into a realm of "too masculine" in MMORPGs worlds, the community responds with reminders that such accomplishments are "only virtual" and in no way compensate for solid world inadequacies.

SYNTHETICALLY MASCULINE

Geek men used the tools of and visibility in the virtual worlds to reconstruct a new synthetic masculinity (in that it was attained in virtual worlds, not that the category itself was somehow flimsy). These geek men supplanted solid world hegemonic masculinity for a virtual proxy that encouraged them to dedicate sometimes extreme amounts of time to the game (McGonigal 2011), as well as compete and measure themselves with other players by comparing gear and "class mastery." This mentality spawned "elite" sectors in the virtual worlds dominated by the "best" gamers and guilds. However, the swagger that sometimes composed this "epeen" was, in more resistant and less elitist sectors of the virtual worlds, labeled as a clear attempt to compensate for solid world inadequacies.

DEFINING EPEEN

Gamer identities were varied and fluidly defined among players themselves often housing a number of contradictions in categories. However, "epeen" (which was an augmentation of "e-penis") seemed to indicate and label gamers who self-identified as "hardcore" or "extreme" (McGonigal 2011). The hardcore gamers were the ones who placed playing the game as their first priority over any other obligation including sleep, family, friends, lovers, school, work, and so on. The hardcore gamers spoke of their actual time played (listed usually in days) as a badge of honor and a symbol of their gamer identity. These players were the most competitive and also

(especially in their view) the most productive. They sought the newest challenges, boasted about their latest accomplishments, duels they had won, mobs slain, and equipment obtained. If an expansion pack (Xpac) released, they had to be the very first one to buy and install it. Many hardcore gamers led their own guilds, managed and recruited players, or were pillar members in their guilds. They more or less logged out only when they absolutely had to do so. They sometimes suffered from a burnout and relapse cycle, in which the relapse tended to be announced as a comeback (they came back to the game to "claim their place").

These players considered themselves to be "the best" touting the gear and money they had collected, the crafts and skill levels they had attained, or achievements and titles they carried. Asgard explained epeen:

> Well having a big dick in real life is like a blessing and it makes you "elite" I guess lmao. Epeen is like having uber leet gear in the game to make yourself feel better about yourself. And to "stroke your epeen" is to do whatever it takes to get the best gear or stand out from the crowd.

Players in MMORPGs were able to increase their masculine status through obtaining coveted items and gear. In doing so, epeen becomes a virtual form of "dick talk" (Lehman 1998) and demonstrates how players connect their sense of masculinity to their e-penis. Cerberus discussed his character:

> I was one of the first well equipped thieves on our server due to my LS's success but eventually became more run of the mill as I leveled other jobs and invested time and money into those. Loved to tank things that others had a hard time doing, and being a good damage dealer in exp parties, as well as helping out the LS with events in smaller but still important tasks. Well for some harder monsters, especially ones where a better

> technique was not yet developed, I would have support roles such as keeping the aggressive mobs occupied while the rest of the group focused on the main target. I was for the most part ignored and trusted to do my job without much help from others, but if I didn't they would have certainly all died, but I did well. I was also usually the one getting TP and setting up skill chains for magic bursts. I was noticed especially on pulls in dynamis and salvage. I have a tendency to strive to be content, and if that means being the best at a certain skill or task then that's what I work on.

Players often called attention to how they stacked up against other players on their respective server in terms of gear. Sometimes this required players claiming temporality as a marker of whether they were better than others who were playing the same class. Being "one of the first" or "one of the best geared" of a class on the server allowed geek men to claim dominance of their class and of others who played the same class. Castronova (2007) argued that this indicates the player base is perfectly happy with unequal outcomes during play "when warriors acquire their priceless, epic, two-handed sword- usually massive, glowing, singing pillar of red steel that they carry around everywhere they go - they *flaunt* it" (143). Some of these men moved into "mentor" roles in which they would attempt to educate the "nubs" how to "play their class" and not "play like retards." Cerberus also highlighted some important roles men are required to embody in game worlds. He carved an image of himself as a stoic, lone warrior who was extremely valuable for the role he played during group activities, a role that would have fatal consequences if a "lesser" player (and by extension a lesser man) failed to uphold this role.

Players of "exceptional skill" have their sense of class mastery reinforced by other players who praise them for being effective in group play, donning leet gear, or clocking large amounts of damage. Arthur discussed his character:

> I would generally be considered a career dragoon, which back when I started was a very looked down upon job. While I suppose that made the game harder for me early on, I think it also gave me a very good reputation--people saw me playing a "lesser" job to great effect, normally showing up the "good" jobs. There were a lot of people who would seek me out for parties. Heh, in the end, I actually generated a group of fan boys and fan girls who both respect me for that, and often come to me for advice and support on dragoon or other jobs. Since then, I've leveled paladin and blue mage to 75, but dragoon continues to be my job of choice; it's what I am most experienced at and what my character is best geared for (I was the second NA on the server with the full relic set and I have all homam items). I also have a smithing skill of 100 and I'm working on getting other skills capped. I do think I have generated a pretty good looking set of gear though; I'm normally seen around on any of my three lvl 75 jobs wearing homam body, hands, legs and feet, plus a set of sunglasses. :)

A default goal of MMORPG play was the accumulation of goods in the form of currency: gold coins, platinum, credits, gil, or equipment: swords, armor, robes, staffs, and magical orbs, or other resources: potions, cloths, ores, ingots, leathers, and precious gems (Dibbell 2006). However, reaching "level cap" took precedence over acquiring virtual goods because it usually requires a “high level” character to obtain the more desirable valuables in the game, or to make money at an acceptable rate.

Acquiring capital and reaching level cap on one or many classes (depending on the game) allowed men to become a type of status symbol in the virtual community. Having “high quality” (HQ) or “epic” gear and equipment, earned them positive recognition from other players for their “leetness” or “uberness.” Some players believed their skill was so vast it could overcome the bias

for other classes in the player base, and possibly even the game programming itself. Although Dragoons (a class in *FFXI*) struggled with the player perception of being a poor DD (Damage Dealer) class, Arthur perceived this as another obstacle that could be overcome with hard work and dedication. In doing so, he believed his status soared in the eyes of other players. His character became a projection of "cool" (Lyman 1987), and having attained a certain level of renown in the player base he could "strut" through towns wearing highly coveted equipment (with sunglasses of course) as a symbol of his success in this geek landscape. Although game goals are clearly defined, and geek men could feel (and did feel) an intrinsic form of success and competence, MMORPGs are social affairs and having other players "stroke their epeen" was congruent with how men require acknowledgement from other men in order to feel masculine (Boswell and Spade 1996; Capraro 2000; Kimmel 2003; Lyman 1987; Martin and Hummer 1989). The recognition of in game success was validated by other geek men who acknowledged their masculine identity through praise of gear, class mastery, and achievements.

RATCHETING EPEEN

Gaming allowed men to meet clearly defined goals in order to feel they had succeeded. Arguably, this could be considered in a positive light. Burdened with rigid standards, exponential chances of failure, and nebulas goals in the solid world to meet masculine ideals, men *should* find gaming a great comfort with tangible and visible markers of progress and success (Kimmel 2003; McGonigal 2011). Part of this cultural pressure and opportunity for success explains why gaming has been and still is largely considered a male domain (Chatfield 2010; McGonigal 2011; Nardi 2010). However, they failed to see how they were constrained as men. Instead of birthing a stronger sense of solidarity between them and other possibly disenfranchised social categories

who came into virtual worlds for similar reasons, geek men largely divided virtual spaces, excluded those they deem failures, and engaged in various "cheats" to ensure they were ahead of their competition.

This was evident in my own access and acceptance into these elitist spaces which usually followed a show of geek bravado:

Me: I spent 37 hours straight camping Leaping Lizzy, and I still have no boots.

Player A: That is freakin hardcore dude, no boots sux though

Player B: I spent six months for my Thief Knife

Player C: You're one of us now

Similarly:

Player A: Omg, Cypress you are still on? Or did you just get up?

Me: Still up, trying to cap Thief sub.

Player A: LOL, awesome man.

Gamers attempted to measure their dedication to the game by citing virtual accomplishments or solid world obligations they neglected. Geek men would explain how they were avoiding work to play, avoiding girlfriends (or wives) to play, and other responsibilities. Time and dedication to the game became masculine currency (Nardi 2010). Players competed, trying to outdo each other in time (long gaming sessions), in speed (how fast they could level a class), and in accomplishments (what coveted items or battles had they participated in recently). Because MMORPGs are *games in motion* and are constantly being updated, players' accomplishments are often undermined as the game installs newer milestones of achievement. Although some geek men bemoaned the changes, most eagerly awaited new challenges to once again have the opportunity to prove they were the best at what they do.

The unfortunate consequences of recreating a strongly competitive atmosphere with clear visible demarcations of masculine geek status were that the space itself became a hostile environment for those who did meet the dominate project. Geek men fell back on tenants of hegemonic masculinity that required other forms of masculinity as well as femininity be subordinate (Connell 1995; Kimmel 2003; Pharr 1997) to epeen masculinity. Nardi (2010) explained that the chat log in *WoW* seemed to be constantly refreshed with homophobic language as a way of reinforcing a particular gender landscape. My experiences in *WoW* were incredibly similar:

> Player A: GAYS HAVE THE RIGHT TO KEEP THERE SEX SHIT TO THERE SELVES AND DONT PUSH IT ON EVERYONE ELSE
>
> Player B: im a lesbian trapped in a male body ;P
>
> Player C: hey, if someone wants to be gay, good- less competition for us straight guys
>
> Player D: lesbians are lesbians cause they dont have a male member =D
>
> Player E: i must confess im a lesbiman
>
> Player B: or maybe im buy sexual just depends on the price
>
> Player F: IM GAY
>
> Player G: THOSE WHO SUPPORT ABORTION ARE BABY KILLERS
>
> Player G: GODLESS FAGGOTS!
>
> Player H: GAY
>
> Player E: Anal Abortion!
>
> Player H: Anal Impale
>
> Player I: shut the hell up

Research on fraternities (Boswell and Spade 1996; Martin and Hummer 1989) has highlighted

that some frats become dangerous spaces for women in part because they have recruited highly competitive men, pitted them against other frats, and in general devalue femininity. Although geek men may not meet the standards required of frats or other male dominated spaces in the solid world (Boswell and Spade 1996; Martin and Hummer 1989), they still participate in the same male discourse of patriarchy. Many dominate cultural practices of devaluing women, erasing bisexuality, and homophobic posturing filled the chat log. This ensured the game world remained a heterosexual male space or "the boys' tree house" (Nardi 2010).

This practice considerably undermined the game experiences of those who did not embody epeen masculinity, and those who tried to breech these spaces had to foremost acknowledge those who controlled these spaces. Renji, a 33-year-old SM/VM explained:

> They were not tolerant. I remember a friend being told she was doing a disservice to the community by subbing scholar instead of white mage. I remember being openly yelled at because I soloed as a dragoon/white mage. You would see people get bashed for not having the right sub job or for not wearing the "correct" gear. It's always been a gated community that's tight-knit, until you decided to deviate from the norm.

Players often snubbed other players on the basis of the gear they wore or the level of their characters. There were invisible rules about how to "play correctly" and these rules were enforced heavily by the dominant geeks. When players were caught "deviating from the norm" they were called out through verbal assaults that labeled them "noobs," "retards," "gimps," or told to "learn their class." The gimp label was often applied to players who failed to "min-max" their class in a specific way (i.e., tweak their characters to the absolute numerical best in terms of gear and class role), or this label was self-proclaimed by (epeen) geek men who were letting other (epeen) geek men know their character currently failed to measure up (and hinted that it

was a work in progress).

Players were largely denied behavioral complexity and social permission to play the game the way they wanted to play. This encouraged the exclusion practices of groups that upheld epeen masculinity. Some guilds and parties had stipulations for recruiting members which required members to possess certain equipment ("must be geared") or have attributes (or talents as in *WoW*) distributed a specific way to be considered for recruitment. Some players were invited to a party only to be booted after the leader had examined the invited player's equipment or skills and decided that player was not suitable to play with.

Meeting the standards upheld by the dominant geek men became an unavoidable obstacle to fulfilling a number of players' personal goals. Some players wanted to participate in parts of the game that were, in a sense, controlled by geek men because the groups and guilds geek men had built provided the easiest means to access them. The situation often spiraled as both players who could not dedicate the time and effort, as well as geek men who did not want to be cast as failures, sometimes turned to different forms of "cheats." Raven, a 28-year-old SM/VM wrote:

> Yes. I'm almost certain Sosuke has/does and I know for certain the dude that bought Cecilia's whm did until the fucker got them all banned...that made me lol. They either don't have the patience to work for it (they may not care about the cost of the gil and the ultimate cost on the game economy) or there is the epeen factor, some people like to show off, and put others down because they are better, and always will be better than others and they will pay any price to make sure that is always true.

Epeen masculinity was in part blamed for the "goldbuying" epidemic in many virtual worlds. Players could purchase gold through a website (via credit card) and almost instantly acquire a desired amount of in-game currency. The new funds allowed players to purchase items and

equipment they believed they "needed" in order to not be labeled as "gimps."

The practice of goldbuying was not openly approved by other players, however, the demands of and access to the elitist spaces where geek men dictated entry and competency enabled (if not encouraged) the practice of goldbuying as well as other cheats. Moxy, a 34-year-old SM/VM wrote:

> I know most considered them as sell outs, but in small quantities it didn't seem like a big deal to me, but some people took it to the extreme and bought 100's of mil gil and other players' accounts for the purpose of sacrificing with bots. When I first started it was just a time saver, but as the GMs cracked down more on that I did it less. As for claiming, it was also a time saver because you got the claims you waited and worked for, but also to combat other botters. If you didn't bot in some places, you had no chance and it was a complete waste of time.

The cutthroat competition between players practically mandated the use of bots and goldbuying. Moxy explained that buying gil (gold) was not considered a "big deal" in part because most players were purchasing gil and even other accounts (sometimes for the sole purpose of heavy bot use, and if that account was banned it would not be a problem because it was, in a sense, a scapegoat account). In fact, to be able to compete *at all* meant players were required to dabble in behaviors that violated the ToS, and possibly risk losing their accounts. Moxy himself was only allowed to join the LS "Perfectionist" after proving he had the required bots and would be able to adequately compete. Moxy and over half the LS were eventually banned.

DISSOLVING EPEEN

Epeen masculinity continued to operate largely unchallenged by the majority of players

in part because the "elite" gamers were considered to "know more about the game" than "regular players." This habitual response attempted to naturalize the geek men's reign in virtual worlds (of course they know the better way to play, they are geeks) (Kendall 2000, 2002). Similar internalizations have built fundamental assumptions about the capacities and abilities of women and men, most notably in sports (Lorber 1993, 1994; Wharton 2008). This kneejerk response that assumed the current reality was the correct one allowed the discriminatory practices to remain self-perpetuating. What few challenges players attempted against geek men were sometimes equally damaging. For example, the following LS argument in *FFXIV*:

Player A: lol what you gonna do hahahaha

Player B: Kick your ass you son of a bitch

Player A: do it

Player B: You and your little buddy for doing that bullshit.

Player A: yea well fuck you bitch its a video game and u got raped

Player B: You both are scammers and fucking cheats. This dude busted his ass making people armor.

Player A: wow its a game stfu, arrest me bitch

Player B: Lmao.

Player A: please please please

Player B: I'll just report you.

Player A: seriously, you wanna report me, your a nerd

Player C: [Player A], if I may interrupt

Player C: Your balls need to drop before you may speak

Player D: lolz

Player A: you guys are crying over a video game

Player A: Like its real life, get over it

Player A: oh no im selling armor someone made! fucking nerds

While Player A was attempting to dismantle the seriousness of his offense (he was caught selling armor that a LS member had crafted for him, which was usually a norm violation), he attempted to attack Player B and the LS members' masculinity by claiming that it was just a game and that they are nerds for caring about any given element of the game (and he does this through an obtuse attempt at emasculation through his use of "rape" and claiming they were "crying"). Similarly, Player C retorted by questioning Player A's masculinity (by mentioning his balls needed to drop) effectively turning the conversation into a contest of emasculation "hot potato" (Pascoe 2005).

It is important to recognize that games *do matter* (Castronova 2005, 2007; McGonigal 2011) and to many geek men they are central to defining their sense of manhood. Similar, but less polemic comments were made by Ayu, a 31-year-old SW/VW:

> I hate people who take the game too seriously or get a god complex, I also really hate the general attitude that it doesn't matter how you treat people because it's "just a game" or "just the internet." It makes no sense - I say "it's just a game" plenty when it comes to people flipping out when someone screws up an instance, but I don't think any kind of social interaction is a game. *WoW* can be an evil evil thing in that sense, people forget that there are humans behind the screen and I guess that's why we made the guild, because we just really try to remember that above everything else unlike *some* guilds.

Ayu attempted to walk the tightrope of understanding that the game existed as a game (and could therefore not always be taken "too seriously"), but also that social interaction of any kind was

meaningful (and therefore could potentially be harmful). She attempted to embody a position which understood that the game did matter for many players, but that having a "god complex" (another way "epeen" was regarded among players) about the game, about skill, or about the way a guild was run inhibited enjoyment and fun for some players (she had just left an elitist guild to create her own).

Arguably, epeen masculinity and attempts to dictate the dominant script for how to play the game was embraced by many players to a certain threshold. To value characters, goods, and accomplishments was acceptable and understandable in most contexts, but to boast about one's "epeen" too much evoked reminders of such accomplishments being "only virtual" or that it was "only a game." Cautionary reminders occasionally refreshed in guild chat among those players who were not seen as meeting the epeen standard:

Player A: dude, just fucking pwned a red mob didn't even get touched

Player B: keep it in your pants Player A =D

Player C: i think you may have taken someones eye out there

Player D: lolz

Player A: ha, sorry got excited- just glad i can fight harder mobs now woot!

Player B: yea, thats coo

Within spaces where epeen masculinity did not have to be proven through continuous boasting of accomplishments, homophobic posturing, or symbolic sexual violence, players treated behavior that did emulate epeen with tongue-and-cheek banter. These spaces and guilds were seen as more "casual friendly" or "social" from the perspective of (epeen) geek men, which was code for "not very good" or "will never accomplish the true goals of the game." However, the players in these casual spaces provided each other with the ability to play the game as they desired, and in doing

so seemed to circumvent the insults, the cheats, and the pressure to be the best.

CONCLUSION

Epeen masculinity highlights a few themes to consider in the push toward a hyper-resonant reality. Geek men do not seem to behave significantly different from other men in respect to conformity to the hegemonic project (Anderson 1999; Boswell and Spade 1996; Capraro 2000; Gerschick and Miller 1994; Kimmel 2003; Martin and Hummer 1989). Though arguably cast as failures in many spheres of solid world life (a reality they often self-proclaim), geek men link themselves to gender assumptions of male technological competence (Kendall 2000, 2002) and the stereotype of the gaming industry's target demographic (Chatfield 2010; McGonigal 2011) to reshape a space in game worlds where they are perceived to be the ideal form of players.

In a sense, they are laying claim to a world that was *built for them*. This assumption which is supported by institutional practices that continue to produce these worlds for geek men (Chatfield 2010; McGonigal 2011; Nardi 2010) frames all non-geek men as the "other" when entering these worlds. Although (arguably) disenfranchised identities such as "geeks" can be empowered by and find solidarity in communities that recognize their identity-specific needs, virtual worlds are largely becoming spaces for everybody (Castronova 2005, 2007; McGonigal 2011; Nardi 2010). Because of this, geek men can no longer hold the virtual world experience to themselves, and will be forced to recognize that "gamers" are becoming more varied, host a multitude of identities, as well as run the gamut on "dedication" to play (hardcore, casual, social). Geeks are no longer the gold standard for "gamers," and thus the institutional practices that create these worlds for them (Chatfield; McGonigal 2011), and the interactional symbols that

geek men use to express their belief in their virtual world dominance (Nardi 2010) should disperse.

Second, virtual accomplishments are meaningful and real to many gamers and that by itself is not problematic (McGonigal 2011). However, when geek men attempt to claim these accomplishments as markers of modern masculinity there is a resurgence of dominating practices, regulatory constrictions, and chances of failure (Boswell and Spade 1996; Capraro 2000; Gerschick and Miller 1994; Kimmel 2003; Martin and Hummer 1989). To enjoy game worlds and one's success in them is valuable, but to express that success in a form that casts other players as "lesser" players is a dangerous process. This push for mastery means men are less likely to ask for help and receive help (especially from other men). This assumption can be debilitating to men as contemporary masculinities in many areas of social life come with a high risk for failure and have severe and sometimes fatal consequences (Barret 1996; Capraro 2000; Kimmel 2003; Sabo 1998). This is not to argue that “failing” in the virtual world will cause severe emotional and psychological consequences including death (although there have been MMORPG related deaths and considerable panic over the “problems” online games may cause, see Williams and Smith 2007), but that the difficulty with contemporary masculinities is that they often prohibit failure as well as devalue dependence, empathy, and cooperation (Connell 1995; Kimmel 2003).

Additionally, the ratcheting of masculine status pushed geek men to seek venues that violate the ToS. Introducing cheating (botting, goldbuying) as a norm for geek men, disqualifies the perception of fun under equal opportunity (Castronova 2005). The behaviors themselves may not be as prevalent if epeen masculinity was not so rigidly enforced (Capraro 2000; Gerschick and Miller 1994; Kimmel 2003). In other words, if geek men were not afraid other men would

label them as "gimps" or "retards" for not having certain pieces of gear, using bots, or having an endless supply of gold, then geek men might not engage in these practices that, in some cases, lead to accounts being banned (which ends the fun altogether).

Finally, the more casual gamers illustrate a template for a balanced approached to fun and community in game worlds. These players shirked the overabundance of sexualized and homophobic insults in favor of a perspective that recognizes each character in the game world was also a person in the solid world. Although they may not have been able to participate in all the content of the game world (content that arguably was crafted with the assumption of the hardcore, geek male player in mind), they enjoyed the game and acknowledged other players' progress. For the more casual and social gamers, visual markers of game progress were not about "dick measuring" (Lehman 1998) and did not serve the purpose of reinforcing a fragile state of epeen masculinity (Connell 1995; Capraro 2000; Kendall 2000, 2002; Kimmel 2003). Casual and social gamers simply played the game, had fun, and symbiotically shared stories of their everyday lives as well as dabbled in the fantasy lore of the game worlds.

CHAPTER 7

CYBERSEXUALITY: EROTICIZING THE VIRTUAL

I was running southeast from Sunstrider Isle enjoying the leisurely stroll to the next town when I was approached by a woman wearing a blue robe. She stopped in front of me and waved me over. "Hello" I said to her before bowing. "Hey, want to have some fun?" she replied. I nodded cheerfully, hoping I had made my first friend and that she would show me around the big city of Silvermoon. "Follow me," she said as she guided me to the next town, and into the inn. I followed her up the stairs where she came to a stop and turned to me. "Now Strip," she said without a word of explanation. (From author's fieldnotes)

Sexuality scholars have questioned taken-for-granted assumptions about how sexuality is organized, controlled, and judged (Katz 1990; Rubin 1984; Seidman 2003). Additionally, queer theory has problematized assumptions about the links between bodies, gender, and sexuality (Gamson 1995; Seidman 1996). Unfortunately, the study of sexuality is often limited by our preconceptions of what sexualities are available, what acts and behaviors should be examined, and what we can label as sexual (Christina 1992; Katz 1990). These problems are compounded by their interwoven relationship to studies in gender and sex (see Connell 1987; Jeffreys 1996; Kimmel 2003; Messerschmidt 2007; West and Zimmerman 1987). With the advent of immersive virtual worlds and bodies such as the ones created for MMORPGs, sexuality has the potential to gain new levels of complexity and flexibility.

Rubin (1984) argues that the evolution of sexuality continues to be restrained largely due

to the enforcement of archaic value systems that inhibit sexual exploration, demonize non-vanilla sex, and rely on essentialist assumptions to explain erotic difference. Rubin (1984:101) declares:

> According to this system, sexuality that is "good," "normal" and "natural" should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female.

Given this "hierarchy of sex acts" (Rubin 1984), some researchers have held that "deviant" sexualities are primed to explore cyberspace (Griffiths 2001; Grov et al. 2008; Jenkins 2001) taking advantage of its "anonymity" and ease of access to sexual material. However, these scholars researchers have rarely interpreted this as a positive prospect, for example:

> There is little point in denying the obvious dark side to the seductive temptations offered by the Internet when it comes to sexual behavior online. Individuals may increasingly rely on the Internet for their social and sexual needs and wind-up spending greater amounts of time there, rather than investing energy in real-world relationships (Cooper, McLoughlin and Campbell 2000: 523).

Implicit in these critiques is the notion that the internet is rife with risk, danger, and sexual (read: bad and immoral) material (Griffiths 2001; Grov et al. 2008; Jenkins 2001). Given the assumption that anything deemed deviant sex needs to be controlled, allowing access to sexual material (or presumably worse, sexual partners) would (supposedly) cause the moral decay of society. This negativity about sexuality constrains research that seeks to explore how sexuality may change if we move beyond chastising sexual exploration. Furthermore, the deployment of the belief that what happens on the internet is somehow less real, has been largely discredited (Castronova 2005, 2007; Chatfield 2010; Dibbell 2006; Markham 1998; McGonigal

2011; Taylor 2006) and therefore the argument of reducing one's internet existence in favor of "real-world relationships" is suspect. This in turn reclaims the importance of sexuality in cyberspace and buttresses academic pursuits in this ethereal realm.

On the more positive side of sexuality and cyberspace, other scholars have hailed the internet as the preferred medium for expressing sexuality (Brookey and Cannon 2009; Chiou 2006; McKenna, Green and Smith 2001; Mustanski 2001; Rheingold 2000; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield and Tynes 2004). Indeed, internet scholars have noted that identity expressions and experimentations are sometimes attempted first through some internet outlet (e.g., chat room, message boards) as a way of probing for community reactions or criticism (Chiou 2007; Kendall 2000, 2002). People can explore multiple identities, switching them as they switch "handles" or screenames (Hillier and Harrison 2007; Kendall 2002; Turkle 1999).

However, the availability of experimentation hinges on preserving anonymity and utilizing multiple identities. This becomes problematic in the MMORPG worlds because the assumption that the cyberspace is an anonymous medium is highly suspect (Akdeniz 2002; Chiou 2006; Turkle 1999), and players largely adhere to the hyper approach. Rarely can anyone navigate cyberspace without claiming a number of identity markers (such as passwords and handles or claims to solid world statuses like gender, income, location and so on). In MMORPGs, anonymity (dampening) is even more difficult because these games encourage the hyper-resonance, deep social bonds, regular communication, and morbid amounts of quality time with other players exploring the virtual world. Furthermore, the virtual community heralds a norm of authenticity in players' personal narratives, unless explicitly stated otherwise, forcing players to be consistent (or face rejection as discussed in Chapter 4).

Cybersex in MMORPGs expands beyond the original application of the cybersex concept. Previously, cybersex has been accomplished through text-based chat (IMs) or through using webcams (Cherny and Weise 1996; Waskul 2003). In both, the interaction is rather simplistic. Participants text erotic dialog or perform for each other through the video feed, ideally cultivating a pleasurable (in most cases masturbatory) session. However, MMORPGs provide additional (gendered) bodies, a virtual space in which to interact, and an entire community of players all of which may broaden or inhibit cybersexual experiences. In this chapter, I discuss how cybersex is accomplished in MMORPGs and critique the resistance to alternative sexuality formations that are based solely in the virtual world.

CYBERSEX IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

In the current study, sex was not at the center of discussions in MMORPGs. Finding a place for sex was often difficult in many of these games because players actively discredited cybersex or prohibited talk about sex from chat logs (although this varied by game). Guilds established rules about "proper" conduct, many of which focused on excluding sex(uality) as a valid conversation topic. However, players remained conscious of the fact that cybersex was taking place in MMORPGs and occasionally discussed it in humorous dismissal. Overall, if players were engaged in cybersexual play, they did not overtly express their participation beyond their very close inner circles, if at all. Announcements in general chat logs from players seeking cybersex were generally met with open hostility:

Player A: Looking for someone to cyber

Player B: GTFO!

Player C: Dude STFU, go somewhere else with that shit

Player D: Reported (*From author's field notes*)

Players openly seeking cybersex partners were often told to "get the fuck out" (GTFO), shut up, and possibly reported to the GMs for spamming the chat log. The distaste for cybersex in the MMORPG community marginalized the behavior and affected how it was performed and under what circumstances it could take place. Cybersex in MMORPGs utilized game functions (text, emotes, and avatars) to enhance the experience. Players negotiated gender and space in their decisions to have cybersex with other players. Ultimately most assessments of cybersex were negative largely because players perceived cybersex as inferior to solid world sex.

BROADENING CYBERSEX

Cybersex in MMORPGs utilized a number of gaming innovations to create a more novel and engaging experience. Traditional cybersex tools, such as erotic text and strip shows (Cherny and Weise 1996, Waskul 2003), were coupled with eroticized virtual bodies and augmented "emotes" that allowed for nuanced control over said virtual bodies in cybersex interactions.

Sex Text and Mistells

Communication in most MMORPGs was primarily text-based. Depending on the game, text-talk had a variety of privacy levels usually ranging from zone shouts to private messages. For example, in *WoW* the command "/whisper" precedes a character's name who the player wishes to send a message. A player types in the command: "/whisper Dragonslayer Hello," and the character with that name, in this case Dragonslayer, sees "Hello" appear in the text box. This form of communication is just like any IM (Instant Message) service (e.g., AIM, Yahoo, or MSN [Microsoft Network]) and allows for private messages between players during the game. However, players may also address larger groups depending on the context.

Text is important because it is the default manner of communicating feelings, ideas, commands, and the like between avatars. Cybersex's roots are in IM chat, MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) (Kendall 2002), and earlier text-only forms, and some research has focused on how people construct sexuality through talk alone (Atkinson and DePalma 2008; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield and Tynes 2004). Explicit text still remained a large part of the MMORPG cybersex experience. Rachel, a 21-year-old SW compared her cybersex experiences:

> The alliance players were so juvenile and pretty immature, misspelled, taking forever to respond, which I guess was them having a little fun. Just laughing, and a lot of "lols" and "hahas." Whereas on the horde, they seemed like they knew what they were talking about, they had a lot of vocabulary for things we were doing.

The text used in the cybersex experience generally framed the quality of the sex. The players Rachel cybered on the "alliance" (one of the warring factions in the game) who were giggly, unresponsive, or inaccurate reduced the believability, and possibly the pleasure of the experience. The "horde" players (the opposing faction) were more descriptive and subsequently gave better cybersex. Similarly, Megumi a 21-year-old sporadic female gamer, explained: "Some people can just watch the screen and that will get them off, but I need someone to be typing with me and interacting or it doesn't work." Players who knew what to say (i.e., type) cultivated more pleasurable experiences.

With text communication in MMORPGs came the risk of sending messages to the wrong audience (called "MT" or "mistell," sometimes "mistype"). Cerberus recalled his friends having cybersex:

> There was a lot of cybering, but most of it was kept to tells. The occasional mistell was met with "what the fuck" and "oh my god" (laughs)…There was one person who was

> notorious for mistells, which would be like "gently nibbles your ear" or something (laughs) for the less explicit stuff.

Cerberus witnessed cybersex MTs that exposed the sender of the message as someone having cybersex. Private messages between two characters allowed for conversations to remain hidden from other characters even if the two characters were standing in a bustling city. However, imputing the wrong command, for example "/g" for guild chat or "alt r" for an auto-response to the incorrect character, broadcasted erotic text to possibly unintended audiences. Consequences for MTing varied as Beck, self-proclaimed *FFXI* cyberlover, explained:

> It was always kept hush hush, until I mt'd in Dragon's Aery. My first mistell was to a zone full of players near a pop window, so *everyone* was at their computers…something about inner thighs. The mistells really turned it into something different...people started trying to trip me up when they thought I was talking to her.

Beck cybered while camping the dragon Fafnir (a rare mob in the game) while dozens of characters were nearby. He MTed his erotic text into "say" chat, which allowed everyone close to his character to read his message about inner thighs. Unlike IM chat or webcam cybersex, where the audience is purposefully selected and the route of communication remains (arguably) secure and uninterrupted, avatars exist in a virtual space *with other avatars* and therefore are forced to constantly monitor their command inputs. Being vigilant in continually broadcasting to *only* the intended audience, became paramount to "virtual privacy."

Eroticizing Virtual Bodies

All MMORPGs involved creating avatars and adventuring into virtual worlds. The avatar itself becomes a focal point in cybersex in MMORPGs because it has been previously unavailable both in IM cybersex and in MUDs where character descriptions were available, but

not actual virtual bodies. Avatars were usually used as a sexual fantasy aid. Typically, this resonated with male players who commented frequently about their own attraction to their avatar. Beck told me:

> I suppose it started with simply the fact that since I got to look at it all day, it might as well be hot. Sad, I know, but there it is. Now I suppose it's more of a tradition than anything else. It's a little annoying at times though. There are days where people will hit on my character thinking I really am female. Then there are other days where I prefer not to be identified as a guy sitting behind the keyboard of that character, if that makes sense. It's a bit of a release to be able to escape everyday life and be completely anonymous and of course... cat girls are hot.

Beck explained his own attraction to his avatar as the reason he chose her. He also noticed that other players found his avatar attractive and sometimes made advances thinking he might be a woman in the solid world.

This meant that at least some of the initial attraction in game is perceptually based on avatars. Arthur, who was on hiatus from *FFXI*, said:

> My main character is male. I do have four mules, three of which are female, but that's just for some eye-candy as I run them back and forth from the auction house.
>
> Although, once I was running my Bastok mule, blonde hume female with ponytail, to the AH and a newish looking male character started following me, then sent me a tell that said "you're hot." It was certainly an odd, slightly disturbing event.

Arthur created three female avatars as his "mules" ("spare" avatars that are relegated to menial tasks such as holding additional inventory) so that he could enjoy looking at them when he logged on to check the auction house (AH). However, not only did Arthur feel his avatars were

attractive, but other characters in the game expressed similar sentiment. Graphical innovation has produced more aesthetically appealing avatars, which has added to their eroticization and pushed the MMORPG cybersex experience beyond its predecessors (Cherny and Weise 1996, Kendall 2002). Men often commented about the attractiveness of their own female avatar or female avatars in general (Nardi 2010).

Women did not discuss being attracted to male avatars, however female players, such as Mia, a *GW* (*Guild Wars*) regular, understood that other players (assumedly male) were attracted to female avatars:

> I guess this had been right after *GW* came out my sister and I were in *GW* and we took off our armor, you have underwear underneath, since I am an Ele, I have really frilly underwear, and I shimmy when I dance. She is a ranger, has pretty plain underwear but she does a really naughty kind of spread and grind dance. It was bad; it still is. I think them and hmm one other has a naughty dance. So back then there weren't too many people out or dancing so we just started dancing away. Weeeee! We would do that a few times to get attention.

Both Mia and her sister understood their avatars could be eroticized. The game interface in most MMORPGs allowed avatars to be stripped (or unequipped) down to varying degrees of underwear and garments. Players would on occasion make stripping avatars into a spectacle, removing their clothes and dancing in the middle of a town. Some players' mule characters were in a permanent state of undress, or dressed in a particular outfit (santa wear, summer festival swimsuit) that reduced them to more of an object than a character.

Additionally, players with some tech-savvy skills would swap data files within the game programs themselves to create unique "skins" (outfits or nudity) for their avatars. Swamping files

with these customized skins allowed some avatars to appear completely nude, or in modified and highly sexualized outfits that were not available in the game by default. As discussed previously, characters of both genders meet certain standards of aesthetics that have very specific cultural sources (Beasley and Standley 2002; Gailey 1993; Mikula 2003; Nardi 2010; Taylor 2003, 2006). However, the availability of these "ideal bodies" and the sum of these customized options allowed for players to eroticize these virtual bodies and incorporate them in cybersex, broadening scripts for doing erotic play.

Furthermore, these additional bodies created various “combinations” between player bodies, avatars bodies, and sexual acts. For example, a SM (solid man) could control a VW (virtual woman) and script a cybersex scene with another VW, which could be controlled by either another SM or possibly a SW (solid woman). This interaction would be difficult to label with the current sexuality identity binary. It could be falsely labeled lesbian sex between two avatars, heterosexual sex between two players, gay or lesbian sex between two players, just cybersex, or possibly not even labeled sex. Cybersex in MMORPGs illuminates assumptions about sexual identities and sexual acts, and has the potential to allow for more fluid forms of sex and sexuality through the possibilities of multi-bodied, multi-gendered sex.

Emotes and Custom Macros

The third element involved in MMORPG cybersex were emotes. Emotes were a type of virtual gesture performed by an avatar. These gestures were programmed by the game designers in specified ways to enhance game play. For example, most MMORPGs have a “wave” emote with which a player can type the command “/wave” and that player’s avatar raised a hand and waved. Emotes were usually accompanied by text and sometimes sound. So, the avatar’s wave gesture was accompanied with a text message that read “Player A waves.” In some games, there

were also a sound elements which the avatar spoke (or cried, laughed) while performing the emote. For the wave emote, the avatar could have said "Farewell" if the emote was intended to indicate a parting between characters.

Emotes were especially important in understanding how cybersex interactions in MMORPGs were more complex than text-only (IM) cybersex. Not only did players have textual dialogue, but their virtual bodies could act out or display emotions and erotic gestures. This meant there was some creativity in using emotes. Players could make emotes appear to be something beyond their original intention and accompany them with new customized text. Ryuk, a rebounding *FFXI* player explained how emotes could be misrepresented:

> It was all in fun and games though. I don't know, some character was sitting and I was on my Tarutaru and sat facing her and I did the cry emote and it kind of made it look like he was...you know…oral sex. Not one of my prouder moments I must say, I didn't even get anything in return.

When sitting down, a Tarutaru (a race in *FFXI*) avatar that used the cry emote looked to be upset and rubbing her/his eyes. However, as in the context Ryuk suggested, players could place another avatar in front of the first and the emote's meaning changed (becoming sexualized because it mimicked oral sex). If players wanted to use this example for cybersex they could accompany the emote with customized text that read "Player A goes down on Player B," which would replace the default text that said "Player A cries." More explicit gestures were augmented from default emotes to create engaging cybersex interactions.

Vincent, a *FFXI* fan, told me "Yea, I've seen some 'couples' do something like /em Elflady rubs Elfguy's shoulders or something. There are a lot of couples it seems." Zidane, a 22-year-old SM/VM in *FFXI*, said with his in-game girlfriend he "used the heart symbol, we sat

together a lot. I have a pet macro, but I used that on all the Mithra when I started (laughs)." Creating a customized emote which blended a default gesture with new text, could be assigned to a macro or a hotkey. Macros for cybersex that utilize emotes and customized text can be created prior to cybersex to initiate and facilitate the experience. Programming several macros can script an entire experience, or just those the player wishes to "show" rather than "tell." Zidane had created a macro that used a default emote for "comforting," (which by default appeared to be a pat on the head) with customized text that became his "pet" emote. Using this macro, Zidane could now gesture to other characters that he was petting them lovingly (and to other players the emote text would read "Zidane pets you lovingly"). Similarly, Vincent witnessed couples in the game using their own customized emotes to show virtuo-physical affection.

The use of emotes in cybersex added a new dimension to the experience. Instead of solely relying on erotic text, avatars could perform gestures that mirrored solid world sex and signified physical touch (e.g., spanking, grinding, hip-thrusting, and so on). This also allowed for some ambiguity in "who" was doing what since the emotes suggested the use of the avatar's body and not necessarily the player's body. Avatars, not the players themselves, stripped their clothing, gave oral sex, and danced erotically. Cybersex allowed sexual interactions between avatars to disrupt conventional sexuality labels. The cybersex between two avatars did not have to mirror the same sexual scripts that would manifest between the two players controlling those avatars. Thus, through the use of virtual bodies, sex dialogue in text, and emotes, some players were able to broaden their cybersexual experiences to a new sphere of virtual interaction while circumventing some of the rigidity of solid world sexuality.

RESTRAINING CYBERSEX

"Popular culture is permeated with ideas that erotic variety is dangerous, unhealthy, depraved, and a menace to everything from small children to national security" (Rubin 1984: 101). Cybersex was not simply accepted nor seen as an innocuous activity. Players attempted to control where and with whom it could take place and in doing so were forced to negotiate gender, safety, and space.

Gendered Desire

The possibility or perceived availability of cybersex in MMORPGs was heavily scrutinized. Male players were concerned primarily with ensuring their possible cybersex partner was a woman in the solid world (an extension of the process of identifying hyper-women). Vincent explained: "I think I am always thinking that female characters are really just men, so I figure there is probably very little to chase after in terms of romance or sex." Similarly, Zidane stated: "One of my older friends that somehow... I ended up hanging out with her more…then I guess we decided we were in a relationship. Picture, phone, and vent etc. I made quite sure she was female before I did anything." Male players thought considerably about the meaning of having cybersex with an avatar that might belong to another male player. To this end, they attempted to establish the "real gender" of anyone attempting to initiate cybersex with them in the virtual world and criticized any players failing to adhere to the hyper approach.

Regardless of the possibility for multi-bodied, multi-gendered sex, most men considered any cybersexual encounter with another male player to be a homosexual encounter, echoing their homophobia (Kimmel 2003; Pascoe 2005; Pharr 1997) throughout the virtual world in chat logs and in rejections of any same gender (read: male to male) avatar play and inconsistency in player-to-avatar gender. Near, a *WoW* guild leader, explained:

> I think it's gay to play as a girl character especially if you are trying to deceive others to get them to fulfill sexual desires with you…That probably doesn't make much sense, but I can't think of how else to say it… I see it as a possibility, but I think, too, that guys don't really want to stare at a guy character's butt all day, so they do it for their own reasons, meaning they get turned on by that type of thing.

Near's assessment of virtual world sexuality highlighted the persistence of displaying "proper" (read: heterosexual) desire. If a player is a man, he should not play a female character, *especially* if his intention is to participate in cybersex.

Additionally, Near's comments illustrate that male players are caught between two forms of homophobia (Kimmel 2003; Pharr 1997): switching gender and eroticizing their avatar, versus remaining gender consistent and not eroticizing their avatar. This debate continued to be discussed in chat logs:

> Player A: So, your gay if you play a female toon? Everyone is gay then.
>
> Player B: I'm not gay. I just like to stare at her ass.
>
> Player C: Yeah, who wants to stare at a dudes ass?
>
> Player D: Your all dumb.
>
> Player E: Wait whos gay?
>
> Player F: You are.
>
> Player G: HOMO!@ (*From author's filednotes*)

Male players attempted to sanction both gender switching as well as the eroticization of virtual bodies. It was problematic for a player to take on a different gender and it was equally problematic to perform cybersex that was not "heterosexual" (loosely applied). For some men, even having cybersex with another male avatar, regardless of the gender of the player controlling

that avatar, was sanctioned, as Rachel explained:

> The male characters, interacting with other male characters, that's where I got most of my negative responses, some were very verbally mean responses. Insulting, vulgar language, lots of accusations and misspelled curse words… Accusations of homosexuality, that I was lame or wasn't playing for the right purpose, just that I was being a deviant I guess.

Rachel, a woman in the solid world, had cybersex with other players using avatars of different gender, but recalled only her male avatars being openly ridiculed when she solicited other male avatars. Since many players assumed everyone is male by default, male players often rejected cybersex with "unknown" players, or ensured they had "proof" that their partner was a "real woman."

Harassment and Discomfort

Conversely, some female players were reserved towards cybersex because players (read: men) were too aggressive in their sexual advances. These (assumed) male advances were partly understood by female players through the discourse of internet predation. Rachel claimed she was "just very very cautious about internet interactions. I actually had a bad experience once using AIM with someone who got a little too obsessed talking to me." Similarly, Odessa, a 37-year-old *WoW* player said "I've heard it before, 'the *WoW* dating service.' I can understand how people could fall into *that* realm. Unfortunately my daughter did that a couple times…Gosh, I'm a mom I have to protect my kids." There was an acute consciousness among women that online worlds were potentially dangerous playgrounds and that men were liable to make unwarranted sexual advances (Cherny and Weise 1996; Grov et al 2008).

Additionally, women often shirked engaging in cybersex because invitations were offensive or aggressive as Kasumi, an 18-year-old SW/VW playing *GW*, explained:

> A few months ago I was playing with one of my female characters. And somehow a conversation got initiated with some random person. They were being very renaissance-esque in their behavior at first, but then they started to ask me my gender and age. When they found out my gender, they started making blatant innuendoes and advances…I played dumb. Eventually the person asked if I understood the meaning of his comments and I answered in a roundabout way. When I kept being evasive he finally gave up, called me a bitch and went away.

What Kasumi experienced was not uncommon. Male players often made overtly sexist remarks towards female players, most notably when their own romantic or sexual advances were halted. Ivy, a mother of two and *WoW* player stated:

> I've seen people make sexist remarks and I've seen some sexual harassment…I have had someone make sexual advances on me in-game and it was actually someone local to me. I mentioned off-hand in trade chat the area that I live in, and someone started messaging me. We were somewhat friendly over a period of time, just "hi, how are you?" type convos, and then he started getting sexual with the conversation after a while. I ignored it and laughed it off for a while, and eventually I asked him to stop and he got offended and stopped talking to me.

When male players could confirm that they were displaying appropriate gendered desire, their blatant advances towards female avatars (who were hyper-women) were so obtuse that they often precluded cybersex interactions. During my time in the game worlds, comments like "Strip bitch," "Get naked," "Dance whore," and "Show me your boobs" were common (obtuse) forms of expressing desire towards female avatars, and similar expressions have been noted in other research on MMORPGs (Nardi 2010).

The scripts in the virtual world paralleled the hegemonic constructions of male and female sexuality in the solid world: men are aggressors and supposedly initiate sex while women are required to act reserved and encouraged to carefully choose their partners. Mia resonated:

> I think it's dumb if someone asks. Like really? Why do you need to know, I'm not looking to hook up, just play the game...cybersex just doesn't appeal to a real personal level, which I think,- Ah! I'm such a girl!- most girls would want that connection…I guess for me it's more knowing the person so that it's real and there is a connection than just the fake cyber sex part.

Mia relied on the same sexual scripts from the solid world to navigate the virtual world. Invitations for cybersex were suspect; after all, the partners were sometimes no more than strangers and women are supposed to value relationships over hook-ups (Armstrong, Hamilton and England 2010; Bogle 2008). Although some female players desired cybersex, their execution of the behavior was filtered through the cautionary discourse of internet interactions and the hegemonic female sexual script. This consequently relegated the permissibility of having cybersex primarily to partners with whom they had built relationships.

Proper Space

In addition to the concerns of sexual identity and undesired advances, most players were consistent in relegating cybersex to a "private sphere" in the virtual world. Reinforcing the convention that sex is a private activity (Rubin 1984), players did not want to witness others having cybersex, or if they were having it, did not want anyone to witness them. Freya stated:

> I have known lots of people use *FFXI* for cybersex... it's not the fondest thing to have to sit through so yeah, there's another way to end up on my blacklist. Usually people will go to less-populated zones to do this, some do it through emote which I think is disgusting.

> Fair enough if you want to do it, keep it to a chat mode that doesn't affect other people.... but to willingly put it out there is asking for criticism or blatantly out there to offend other people.

Freya explained that she would automatically blacklist (a function that eliminates any text, emotes or conversations with an avatar) any characters she saw cybering in the game. She noted that players often ventured into less populated areas of the game in order to keep their cybersex private and out of sight. This meant that players' options for "sex space" were considerably limited because they did not want to be "blatantly out there to offend other people." This hindered cybersex in MMORPGs because the use of emotes and the virtual bodies were restricted in most places, forcing cybersex back into text dialog only, which could still be exposed from a mistell.

Cybersex received even greater scrutiny because it could be recorded, as Laike, a *WoW* fanatic, mentioned:

> I think it's pretty silly. I mean, it was the sort of thing that was maybe intriguing, I can't really say cool, I suppose, back when I was a teenager and I didn't have a car, so I was stuck at home in front of a computer. I don't really have anything against it though, unless someone's keylogging you. Have to practice safe cybersex, you know?

Laike highlighted the possibility that other players could record cybersex interactions between characters. Through a keylogger, screenshots, or "fraps," players "caught" having cybersex could be defamed in the virtual world. Keyloggers are programs that record text and keystrokes. Usually they can be used to steal account information, but they may also be utilized in a voyeuristic way (although their practicality seemed limited). Screenshots capture text, scenery, and avatars in pictures. Players could catch avatars having cybersex or mistelling erotic text by

saving the screenshot. Fraps is one of the ways players could record the events in real time (like a video camera). This could be another voyeuristic act where one player records other avatars having cybersex or players having cybersex record themselves.

Many interviewees pointed me towards forums with archives of posted screenshots, video of cybersex, or mistells. These posts functioned in part as a form of control allowing the virtual community at large to chastise and tease players caught having cybersex. The possibility of exposure compounded the need to hide cybersex in private rooms, less populated areas, and off the road, which is similar to the space sex is permissible in the solid world (Rubin 1984). The concern for undermining sexual identity, the discomfort and reservation towards undesired advances, and the community's control of virtual space all restrained the proliferation of cybersex in MMORPGs.

ASSESSING CYBERSEX

Cybersex was neither obliterated nor fully embraced in MMORPGs. Some players explained that cybersex offered another dimension to the virtual world experience. Beck claimed:

> Leveling Drg [a class] is a drag. Lots of time LFP [looking for party], and well, I had to keep myself entertained somehow. There was another Drg that I knew. She was good fun to talk to, and I started by talking to her about Drg, and this that and the other. Eventually, it just turned into cyber sex (laughs). So yeah, that's about it really that went on for a few months. It was good fun, and very distracting…its cyber sex, it's all about how vivid your imagination can be and trying to tune into the other person at the same time.

This perspective promoted cybersex as a suitable distraction to the usual boring pace of some MMORPGs. Cybersex was seen as an imaginative process that could create enjoyment and nurture a relationship with a new social link. Conversely, cybersex could be used to stay close in an already existing relationship. Edea, who played both *WoW* and *FFXI*, explained: "When my fiancé and I were dating we did, he is in the army so he was away a lot, like now...we did, and I'm sure others do." Edea managed to keep in touch with her partner while he was stationed abroad and used the virtual world to nourish their sexual relationship.

Through the virtual world, players could utilize cybersex to forge new sexual relationships or buttress existing ones. However, cybersex was not assessed as having the same gravity as a solid world sexual relationship. Most players considered cybersex merely a substitute of a "real" sexual relationship. Corcell explained: "With the game we use the /em to start it and when we would cyber on the game, I would use her in-game name… After we met in real life, we don't cyber anymore." Corcell initially started his sexual relationship with someone he met in the game world, but once the relationship transferred into the solid world he did not pursue cybersex. Players commented that cybersex was more enticing when they lacked a sexual relationship outside the game. Megumi resonated:

> It doesn't mean anything. I definitely wouldn't continue, well I would hope if I found a partner that I wouldn't need to sign on because I'd have a partner that could do that for me…if someone tells me they're married or have a girlfriend I won't hang out with them because that's a line I won't cross.

Some players explained they would replace cybersex in the game world when they found solid world partners. This indicates that players did not perceive cybersex as offering much more than a temporary fantasy aid, or a proxy for a "real" sexual relationship.

Regardless of the enjoyment of the experience, sex in the game was considered inferior to sex outside the game. The appeal of multi-bodied or multi-gendered sex within virtual worlds was arguably not embraced or was simply ignored. Additionally, Megumi mentioned that she would not cyber any player who was in a solid world relationship. This meant that even though cybersex was seen as inferior, it was still seen as sex, or as sexual. Therefore, to some players, cybersex was considered to breech monogamous standards that were assumed in solid world relationships (Alter 2007; Rubin 1984).

Some players almost completely devalued cybersex. Lily, a 20-year-old SW/VW gamer in *WoW*, defended: "No, I don't do the whole cyber sex thing….Sex is a more private matter to me and to bandy it about using cybersex is kind of like porn to me. Sure it's erotic, but there's no personal attachment so it's meaningless to me, if that makes sense." Lily recognized that cybersex could be considered erotic, but she denounced the lack of personal attachment. Although cybersex ran the gamut on the "closeness" of partners involved, invoking "no personal attachment" served to demote cybersex below sex in the solid world. Other players defended that cybersex "just seemed unnatural," "weird" and "pathetic." Selphie, a 32-year-old SW/VW player in *WoW*, proclaimed:

> Ok like, a female character walks up to you and says "Do you want to cyber with me? *Really*? I mean what are you going to do, take off your non-existent clothing and dance around in your underwear? I mean really? That would be something for a 12-year-old. I don't want to be one of those girls because I'm not one of *those* girls. They're like *WoW* whores. They're worse than the local tricycle, you know everyone rides her once...do you really want to be a *WoW* whore? They can get a bad reputation for some of the things they do. I know one that does it on her main and she needs to stop or I can't be her friend

anymore because I'm not to be associated with somebody who's going to have that bad of a reputation. I know I shouldn't say it, but that's a whore.

Selphie attacked both the act itself and the players who had cybersex. She was astonished that players found anything positive about cybersex. However, she still imbued cybersex with sexual (gendered) meaning because the cultural standards of women's sexuality were invoked in her assessment of her female friend who enjoyed cybering (Armstrong, Hamilton and England 2010; Bogle 2008; Rubin 1984). These sexuality conventions limited how players perceived cybersex and the context in which the behavior was seen as permissible, thus diminishing the potential for cybersex to revolutionize sexuality.

CONCLUSION

Cybersex in virtual world video games offers the interesting potential for questioning assumptions regarding sexuality. First, cybersex in MMORPGs incorporates and expands the original applications of the term "cybersex." Players are embedded in immersive virtual worlds and utilize several tools to enhance their cybersex experiences. Erotic text still remains at the focus of cybersex, but is accompanied by emotes that offer visual and textual appeal. Through emotes, players can simulate virtuo-physical touch to heighten the pleasure and intimacy of cybersex. Players also rely on eroticized (gendered) virtual bodies, assessing avatar attractiveness and using avatars as *both* a visual fantasy aid and a medium for erotic expression. Virtual bodies can blur the sexuality distinctions of the solid world that attempt to divide sexual experiences by the bodies (genitals) of the participants (Armstrong, Hamilton and England 2010; Bogle 2008; Gamson 1995; Jeffreys 1996;; Messerschmidt 2007; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Attempts at defining the *sexuality of cybersex* within the het/homo binary illuminates the standards by which we continue to limit sexual expression and identities (Gamson 1995; Rubin 1984; Seidman 1996). Players seem to resist the murkiness of cybersex because virtual bodies (in their perspective) mask the "true sex/gender" of the person(s) behind the screen (Kendall 2000, 2002; Nardi 2010; Turkle 1995). This, in essence, increases the demand for disclosure and hyper-resonance because the sexuality identity binary can be so easily undermined (Gamson 1995; Rubin 1984; Seidman 1996; West and Zimmerman 1987). They are fearful in part because the inclusion of virtual bodies and virtual sexual scripts (how they perform sexuality) compounds cybersex experiences with at least four distinct bodies (two virtual, two solid), creating the possibility for *many* sexual interactions, and undermining the assumption that sexuality has only two categories (Katz 1990). This is similar to the fears harbored in interacting with transbodies (Gauthier and Chaudoir 2004; Wilchins 1997). In its most liberal form, there are no links between the sex/gender of the player, the sex/gender of the avatar, and the sexual act performed during cybersex. Some men seem fearful that cybersex might allow them pleasure with other men. Some women face difficulty in engaging partners in cybersex, fearing divergence from the solid world sexual script, backlash from other women, and harassment from men. Both may subtly recognize that cybersex will undermine their sexuality, and render it undefined.

Second, resistance continues in respect to sexual space. Cybersex is subjugated to the sewers, abandoned inns, and less populated areas. Players fear sex, control sex, and denounce sex. The scripts are familiar: (cyber)sex should remain private; it should not be "bandied about" (Gamson 1995; Rubin 1984; Seidman 1996). Players informally control the expression by policing the virtual world. Deploying examples of mistells and fraps of players having cybersex as examples of the "darkside" of MMORPGs serves to closet (cyber)sexual expression.

Formally, players may involve GMs who in turn police the game and sanction players (Spiess 2007). Being "caught" having cybersex, can lead to ridicule, which buries the expression and reinforces the players' previously mentioned fears. There is no completely "safe space" for cybersex to flourish. This contrasts with exhaustive-simulation titles like *Second Life*, where sex is (seemingly) allowed space. However, players claim that "most perverts who enjoy virtual-sexual roleplaying situations…flock to corners of *Second Life*" (Spiess 2007, 1) revealing that just having a place for cybersex does not lead players to embrace it. However, cybersex persists in MMORPGs. Despite a general distaste, many found *some* space for cybersex and perhaps even enjoyed hiding deep in the woods, in the corners of unpopulated towns, and under the ocean.

Finally, although in MMORPGs it was limited usually to one-on-one experiences, cybersex was *acknowledged as sexual*. Players used cybersex to sweeten their time spent playing the game as well as to form new relationships and maintain existing ones. In addition, some acknowledged that having cybersex would violate a monogamous relationship (Alter 2007). In part this validates the expression, but also reinforces perceptions that virtual worlds destroy solid world relationships (Nardi 2010; Smith 2008). Confronted by the choice of virtual or solid world sex, players choose the latter. This devalues cybersex as merely a temporary, situational, or inferior sexual expression, arguably similar to assumptions about bisexuality (Brasfield 2006; Gamson 1995; Rubin 1984; Seidman 1996). Even players who enjoyed everything about cybersex preferred an active solid world partner over a cyber one. The hyper-resonance approach marshals consistency in solid-to-virtual body representation and furthermore to sexual scripts (thus the preference for transparent sexual relationships online, or for solid over virtual). Damps may allow for more blurry cybersex where partners may know little about solid world realities,

where sexual scripts are fluid, and where binary sexuality is not so rigidly enforced. A *true cybersexual* would find no consequence in having cybersex with anyone, using any script, and would not create a hierarchy between solid world sex and virtual world sex. However, there seems to be very little evidence of a "cybersexual" identity in MMORPG worlds, that is, a sexuality undefined by solid world conventions or a sexuality that existed only in the virtual world.

CHAPTER 8

PIXEL PROFITEERS: RACE IN VIRTUAL SPACE

The linkshell and I had gathered in Sauromugue Champaign slightly before Roc's pop window, but we had missed the claim. We stood watching our competition battle the giant bird. Bitterly, the linkshell chatted about the disease our competitors represented to "real gamers." Eventually, lacking enough players to finish the kill quickly, Roc went berserk killing the tank and mages. My linkshell erupted with excitement. "DIE!" players cheered into say. "Die fucking gilfarmers. Just die, die, die." A berserk Roc tore through the remaining avatars, and my linkshell offered no assistance, no heals, no pity. After all, they were gilfarmers, not players. (From author's fieldnotes)

Racial discrimination and xenophobia have remained volatile issues in contemporary scholastic studies (Chou and Feagin 2008; Kohatsu et al. 2011; Le Espiritu 2007; Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Tsai 2006; Zuberi 2001). Even the supposed "model minority" of Asian Americans suffers antagonism from racist and xenophobic ideologies (Alvarez et al. 2006; Kohatsu et al. 2011; Tsai 2006) with very real consequences (Chou and Feagin 2008; Kohatsu et al. 2011; Le Espiritu 2007; Lu 2010; Markwyn 2008). Moreover, the myth of the model minority pushes Asian Americans into dispersing ties to Asian culture while attempting to assimilate into the (white) dominate culture (Chou and Feagin 2008; Kohatsu et al. 2011). Subsequently, this "myth is often used to legitimize the denigration and negative stereotyping of other racial minorities as well as gloss over the racial experiences of Asians" (Kohatsu et al. 2011: 63). Arguably, because of this the struggles of and hostility toward Asians have been overlooked

because of how the model minority myth renders those realities invisible (Chou and Feagin 2008; Kohatsu et al. 2011).

Scholars have continued to support to premise the race is socially constructed through material and discursive practices and power negotiations (Kobayashi and Peake 2000; Le Espiritu 1997; Gilroy 1987; Tatum 2000; Zuberi 2001). Omi and Winant (1986) suggest that people inevitably rely on race to explain certain social differences in similar ways that they rely on assumptions about gender. However, in virtual game worlds, solid world race, nationality, and ethnicity, are arguably hidden, and color of skin is quite simply an auxiliary trait, something that is toggled during the creation of an avatar. Without the visual cues that (often poorly) categorize (solid world) race, it may be possible to disregard preconceived notions about race in these worlds (Kendall 2000, 2002; Nardi 2010; Omi and Winant 1986; Zuberi 2001). This is not to argue that so called "color blind" ideologies (as they have been largely discredited, see Kohatsu et al. 2011) are bolstered by the absence of solid world race in virtual worlds, but to consider how the lack of interactional and visual cues (and assumptions) of race used in the solid world may reframe expectations and community in the virtual world. Arguably, it is more likely that the discriminatory practices from the solid world permeate the virtual and continue the very antagonisms that could be left behind (Kendall 2000, 2002; Nardi 2010).

Kendall (2000) in her study of the MUD BlueSky was interested in how race would (or would not) play a role in online interactions that took place without bodies (text-based chat groups). The ideal that “mudding transcends ethnicity” was subverted and instead race online manifested into a “white unless stated otherwise” norm (Kendall 2000, 2002). Additionally, Kendall (2000, 2002) argued that some members of BlueSky claimed a culturally white identity rather than a racial one by identifying with the subculture of internet junkies, tech-heads, and

"nerds." However, she explains that the more people learn about another's solid world statuses, the less likely they will allow someone to claim identities that are not congruent with those statuses (Kendall 2000, 2002). In MMORPGs, players operate under this white norm, which attempts to pass as universal, and rarely discuss the races of the solid world (Kendall 2000, 2002; Kobayashi and Peake 2000; Nardi 2010). However, with the advent of real money trading (RMT), which is the exchange of the currency of the solid world for the currency and goods of the virtual world, race discussions reemerge (Dibbell 2006; Heeks 2008; Nardi 2010).

RMT has quickly become a salient issue in the minds of scholars and gamers (Castronova 2005, 2007; Dibbell 2006; Heeks 2008; Nardi 2010; Papagiannidis, Bourlakis, and Li 2008). Castronova (2005) and Heeks (2008) thoroughly examine virtual world economics, intellectual property rights, governance, and virtual loot. Castronova (2005: 147) argues that synthetic worlds are not separate economically from our world and he offers the concept of "the membrane" as useful tool in understanding their relationship:

> The membrane can be considered a shield of sorts, protecting the fantasy world from the outside world…however this membrane is actually quite porous. Indeed it cannot be sealed completely…as a result the value of things in cyberspace becomes enmeshed in the valuation of things outside cyberspace.

Taylor (2006) highlights the vested interests of the players and the game creators in respect to RMT activities. She argues that players who purchase virtual goods (or accounts) bypass a certain amount of time spent playing the game (Taylor 2006). Since this possibly reduces the time a player keeps an active account, it opposes the game creators' interests (who profit from monthly subscription fees), and subsequently creates unbalance between the players in the game itself (which may lead to antagonisms over fairness and in-game performances) (Taylor 2006) .

Dibbell (2006) experimented with becoming a RMT and the challenges of trying to make a living playing in virtual worlds. He found RMT was a viable occupation, albeit unstable, and that virtual cheating (botting) and "farming sweatshops" were far more likely to produce suitable profits than a single player attempting to profit alone (Dibbell 2006; Heeks 2008; Papagiannidis, Bourlakis, and Li 2008).

Regardless of how the goods are produced, game scholars are forced to address the issue of who owns the virtual loot (Castronova 2005, 2007; Dibbell 2006; Taylor 2006). Any game creator will explain that all bits of data in the virtual world belong to the company that built said world, as well as the ability to host a server with the game data (Castronova 2005, 2007; Dibbell 2006; Smith 2010; Taylor 2006). Some researchers have examined the deployment of the ToS as a preemptive strategy used by game creators to declare ownership of all virtual goods (Smith 2007; Grimes 2007; White 2007). However, there is slippage in the enforcement of the ToS, and virtual loot exchanges hands in the similar fashion as other goods in cyberspace (Kang 1998; Lucking-Reiley 2000; Papagiannidis, Bourlakis, and Li 2008). Virtual exchange is a global social system that increasingly calls for regularization and protection of assets (Balkin 2004; Lastowka 2004). Scholars and pop cultural have begun to understand game creators as corporations that may have a monopoly on virtual goods, and that virtual economies should be critically analyzed (Castronova 2005, 2007; Dibbell 2006; Klang 2004; Papagiannidis, Bourlakis, and Li 2008; Smith 2008; Taylor 2006). Thus far, attempts at legal intervention have been few and have couched the argument in broader legal concerns (Castronova 2007; Yamaguchi 2008).

Although there is a growing body of literature on RMT (see Castronova 2005, 2007; Heeks 2008; Papagiannidis, Bourlakis, and Li 2008; Steinkuehler 2006; Taylor 2006; Yee 2009)

research is difficult because players associated with RMT practices risk both their virtual assets as well as their status in the game world by taking part in any investigative project (Grundy 2008). Players who claim not to participate in RMT hold the belief that the majority of RMT is due to Asian gamers, in particular Chinese gamers dubbed "goldfarmers" (Castronova 2005, 2007; Dibbell 2006; Heeks 2008; Taylor 2006). RMT is not only a violation of the intellectual property rights of the game creators, but disregards a norm among the virtual community that players should not "cheat" by using alternative means to gain access to goods and currency (Castronova 2005, 2007; Dibbell 2006; Taylor 2006; Yee 2009). Because of this, it is generally perceived as “hurtful” to game worlds and the economies that exist within them (Castronova 2005; Heeks 2008). These realities encourage players to express their resentment for goldfarmers, which manifests in everything from racist language, virtual harassment, to the exclusion of goldfarmers from the virtual world community. This process of identifying and punishing goldfarmers seems linked to world resonance.

CONSTRUCTING THE GOLDFARMER

The discourse surrounding the goldfarmers and the response (or lack thereof) to the “problems” goldfarming created within the game was increasingly in the players' consciousness as cyberwork became heavily rooted in MMORPG economies (Castronvoa 2005; Heeks 2008). Discussion of the goldfarmers would quickly dissolve any attempt by damps to preserve the play bubble and began a process through which solid world realities were synthesized and reconstructed in the virtual world. Players used a handful of “common sense” assumptions in order to stratify the player base into goldfarmers and “normal” players (i.e., workers vs. players). Since players’ bodies were all but invisible to the game world, identifying goldfarmers relied on

avatar traits, "suspicious" gaming behavior, and language. After accusations were made, players determined whether goldfarming was permissible by negotiating their dedication to the game world, the discourse from the game creators, and their own conceptualization of the solid world life of the goldfarmers.

IDENTIFYING GOLDFARMERS

Players used a combination of identifiers to label goldfarmers in the virtual world, which included avatar names, play time and occupied space, as well as language. Whether the combined evidence of all of them was needed to label a goldfarmer depended on the assumed gravity of such an accusation and the players' perspectives on the reality of goldfarming.

Avatar Names

The first technique used by players was assessing avatar names. Players claimed that "weird names," "nonsense names," "ethnic names," and "oriental names" were immediately suspect and were indicatory of goldfarmers. Salamander, a 22-year-old SM/VM in *FFXI*, explained: "They are all weird like a jumble of letters that are almost a word but not, like someone just mashed a bunch of keys on the keyboard." The assumption players held about lackluster avatar names was congruent with the idea that "real players" would care enough to name their avatar. "Jumbled" names were seen as evidence that the players controlling said avatars did not care, did not identify with, or possibly were simply using the avatars as a means to an ends, in other words for goldfarming. Similarly, Arthur a co-leader of a linkshell in *FFXI*, resonated:

> Heh, so, in my old LS, I was the second in charge, and normally seen as a relatively calm, level headed player, always fair, always nice. Then some people saw what

> happened when we came across a RMT group. I remember someone saying something to the effect of "I've never seen him act like that!" I become very aggressive against people I know to be RMT either because of a name like "Klajbfaifb" or because they were well established as RMT on the server.

Interestingly, players not only overlooked the possibility of a weak bond between avatar and player (in other words that a non-goldfarmer player may not "care enough" to name their avatar anything special), but they also ignored the presence of the "random name generator" in games like *FFXI* and *WoW*. Selecting the random name generator during avatar creation, often granted a newly created avatar some inaudible phrase as a name. However, players insisted that nonsense names were important in identifying goldfarmers, and that even if the random name generator was used, it would certainly not be used by real player.

Determining what counted as one of these names was equally problematic. Through my own experiences, I played with many non-goldfarmer players who used avatar names such as "RawrDkftw"[12] which might appear to be a random mashing of the keyboard, but is merely a combination of different internet slang acronyms. Additionally, many players chose to name their avatars after fictional characters from various media forms including anime, manga, and console RPGs (Role Playing Games), which may create the perception of having an "ethnic name." Obviously, the subjectivity in determining a nonsense name varied with gaming experience and from player to player and was at best, deployed arbitrarily as an identifier of goldfarmers.

Suspicious Play

The second factor used to sift through the player base and label goldfarmers was

[12] This name is not a player I knew or interviewed in the game. I created this for example purposes only.

determining whether avatars were prone to “suspicious” playing behavior. This behavior could manifest in extended play hours (the avatar was logged in almost every hour of every day), methodical farming (the avatar was seen farming a particular area or mob consistently), or in lackluster game performance (the avatar was “gimp” or had failed to complete certain game milestones that most players covet). Beck explained how he identified a goldfarmer:

> How to identify one…I can't give you an exact formula. It’s how they act, what they do and do not have, how they move with other gilsellers how they kill, WHERE they kill. After playing for as long as I have, the patterns have stuck in my mind to a point where I can spot them instantly. Human players can do things repetitively like they do but gilsellers are very methodical, almost robotic and human players can be as well but its different, I can’t explain it, I just know.

This “robotic” behavior or sometimes explained as "excessive farming" could categorize players as goldfarmers. Many players attempted to create a clear distinction between the “human players” and the goldfarmers (who were human, but rhetorically cast as less human than players), explaining that “they” function differently than actual human players.

This ideology persisted among the players dividing the player base and undermining the potential for these games to foster greater cooperative play. Players proclaimed that these supposed goldfarmers were monopolizing certain areas or mobs because they farmed relentlessly, which seeded resentment in the player base. Additional suspicious behavior included the lack of good equipment, attempts to remain anonymous, and frequenting a particular area or zone. Balthier a 24-year-old SM/VW in *FFXI*, explained:

> Well, I like to think that most of the time their gear isn't very good, since they have to save that money that could be spent on getting the currency to sell, also because most of

> the times they are hiding their levels, using the /anon function. When they aren't hiding it, you can see that their in-game country rank is low, and they aren't wearing a linkshell pearl. When they wear one, people can easily recognize the name of the linkshell from what they have seen that linkshell doing, like camping a NM and competing against players.

The use of subpar equipment was deployed as an indicator because goldfarmers were (presumably) foremost concerned with making money. This meant that any additional virtual currency was assumedly sold for solid world cash instead of used to better equip the avatars being controlled by the goldfarmers. Similarly, Junpei a 29-year-old SM/VM in *FFXI*, wrote:

> Well, RMT, they are in a party, all same outfits, almost always anon, crappy gear usually or missing some important pieces or gear that anybody on that job would want. A person always in a zone and never leaves just for gil reasons like fishing or camping NMs, stuff like that.

All of these identifiers of goldfarmers were game-based including avatar equipment and presence in a zone for a prolonged period of time. However, regular players were mostly afforded the behavioral complexity of extended farming and the absence of "good gear." Regular players would farm routinely, for extended hours, and regular players ran the gamut on the quality of the gear they donned (though some of this was linked to their own status as quality players).

Language

Because the previous identifiers relied solely on the in-game statuses, there remained the possibility that a suspected goldfarmer could actually be a regular player that had a weird avatar name, was wearing poor gear, and enjoyed farming. Since most players assumed that goldfarmers were Chinese (which is not completely inaccurate, but there is considerable

variation, see Heeks 2008; Nardi 2010), players assessed the use of language as further evidence of in applying the goldfarmer label. Lavi, a *FFXI* player, explained: "[They are] dirty rotten cheaters. From my understanding they're mostly Chinese, and from my experience with them they speak Chinese mostly and some English, which I attribute to the game and contact with players." Speaking Mandarin was not seen as the product of living in China, a part of Chinese identity, or an attribute of a Chinese player. The ability to speak Mandarin was the "proof" that a player was a goldfarmer. This is consistent with previous research that argues that limited English proficiency can exaggerate difference in perspective social networks (Tsai 2006). However, the expectation of English proficiency itself, in virtual worlds where players ethic and racial identities (as well as geographic locations) are varied, is particularly problematic.

Not speaking English or speaking only "some English," has been argued to be definitive in identifying goldfarmers (Yee 2009). This was not entirely the case with some MMORPG players. For example, non-English speaking Japanese players were held in high regard and never assumed to be goldfarmers as Vahn, a 28-year-old SM/VM in *FFXI*, explained:

> Getting a JP [Japanese] party is incredible. Well, if you can. They don't like English or NA [North American] players that much. Most of the time they don't speak English or choose not to, but they use the auto-translator to invite you. Of course, there are times they use the auto-translator to tell you they don't want you by saying "{English} {No, thanks}" which is pretty much like saying "you suck American, go away." Anyway, they rock though. [They are] the most efficient players in the game by far, JP parties will easily net you 6-8k [XP] an hour. They just know how to play better than we do.

Similarly, players discussed the abilities of Japanese players with reverence despite not always being able to communicate with them:

Player A: Holy fuck [Player B] you gained four fucking levels last night?

Player B: ha, yea.

Player C: language [Player A]

Player A: sorry, but jeez that's a lot now we can't level together

Player B: yea, I got a sweet jp pt out in quicksands and dinged 4 times, they were quiet ha. Only understood the "www" but it was awesome

Player A: ah jp, gotcha

Player B: I'm lucky I pt jp a lot cuz I'm on late, we can static with my sam tho [Player A]

(From author's fieldnotes)

Non-English speaking players were not all suspected of being goldfarmers, and some, like the Japanese players, were regarded by English speaking NA players as the *ideal players*.

Furthermore, in a (regional) hierarchy of "quality of player" goldfarmers were perceived to be the worst kind of players in respect to skill. While both Japanese and Chinese players had varying proficiencies in English, they were perceived very differently in the virtual world (similar comparisons have been highlighted in the solid world, see Markwyn 2008). The pervasive assumption was that not all goldfarmers were Chinese players, but that all Chinese players were goldfarmers. This was consistent in my own experiences playing. After farming in an area for some time, I would occasionally be sent a tell that read: "Ni hao." The phrase "Ni hao" (which translates loosely as "hello") was often used as bait by English speaking players to engage a suspected goldfarmer in Mandarin dialog. This was done with no intentions of holding a conversation, as this word was often the extent of most English speaking players' knowledge of Mandarin .This "baiting" alone demonstrated the stereotype that persists of all Chinese players.

Ironically, MMORPGs are games global in scope. These games unite multiple solid

world regions into virtual worlds allowing players from around the globe to participate in collaborative adventures. Obviously, native languages are varied, and in *FFXI* and *FFXIV* the "auto-translate" function (and dictionary) was designed to encourage players across cultures to group together efficiently despite linguistic differences. However, the stereotype of the Mandarin speaking goldfarmer is so pervasive it undermines the original intention of allowing a diverse group of players to enjoy the virtual together. The sum of this "evidence" used by players in MMORPGs to apply the goldfarmer label was deeply flawed, ethnocentric, and at best, arbitrary. Goldfarming and cyberwork take place in varied regions across the solid world, not just China (Heeks 2008; Nardi 2010). However, players still eagerly sought to identify goldfarmers as a way of distinguishing "workers" and "players" in order to discern how to interact with those they met in the virtual world.

CONDEMNING GOLDFARMING

Whether players decided if goldfarming should be punished, ignored, or reported hinged on their assessment of the solid-virtual world distinction. Players who condemned goldfarming were supportive of the game's creators, sought to sanction goldfarmers officially and informally, and boasted about maintaining the balance of the game.

Creator Discourse and Official Enforcers

The game creators themselves actively participated in and manipulated the discourse surrounding goldfarming through reporting on the persistence of the behavior and the measures being taken to eliminate the "nefarious" goldfarmers. Some game studies scholars have noted the deployment of the ToS as a preemptive strike against goldfarming (Smith 2007; Grimes 2007; White 2007). Square-Enix's agreement stated:

> YOU DO NOT OWN YOUR ACCOUNT OR CHARACTER OR HAVE ANY PROPERTY RIGHTS TO YOUR CHARACTER OR ITS VIRTUAL ASSETS. YOU MAY NOT SELL, RENT, OR REPRODUCE YOUR CHARACTER OR ITS VIRTUAL ASSETS FOR ANY COMMERCIAL PURPOSE. [Capital letters in original]

By agreeing to the aforementioned terms, a player can gain access to the game world (declining the terms denies one from playing at all). The game creators clearly forbid players from using the game to make money (although the reasons are unclear the debate seems centered around separation of worlds, legal issues, and taxes, see Castronova 2005; Dibbell 2006; Smith 2007).

Square-Enix later created a "Special Task Force" (STF) charged solely with ferreting out goldfarmers and banning all accounts involved in RMT. The STF reported anti-RMT measures during the months of September 2008 to October 2008, stating:

> There are two reasons for the increase in bannings. The first reason is that the Special Task Force strengthened its activities against accounts involved in selling gil starting last month. The second reason is that we've obtained new methods for dealing with RMT through our investigations and, as a result, have been able to investigate more accounts than ever before, effectively increasing the number of accounts banned. Using these new methods, we not only are capable of verifying accounts directly involved in RMT but also accounts that are being used to accumulate the gil sold through RMT. These new methods have proven especially effective against violators of the user agreement involved in RMT such as hunters and illegal fishers.

It is not surprising that players in the game who punished goldfarmers did so knowing the game's creators were also engaged in nullifying RMT activities. Players explained that the STF in *FFXI* had been somewhat effective and that it had lowered the cost of many game items

(because gil had been removed from circulation). The consensus between the creators of the game and players who valued keeping the economics of the solid world separate from the virtual world, justified the charge to "purge" the virtual world of the goldfarmers.

Players who were concerned with the activity of (suspected) goldfarmers had the option to report to the GMs (Game Moderators). The GMs are primarily responsible for ensuring the continued function of the virtual world. They are charged with menial tasks such as avatars getting “stuck” in the virtual environment, to charges of harassment, verbal abuse, and behavior that violates the ToS agreement. Since goldfarming is one such violation, some players chose to bring a GM's attention to possible goldfarming activity. Arthur elaborated on his continued interaction with GMs:

> I will take any action I can to harass, kill or otherwise disturb those individuals. Furthermore, in the recent release of statistics, I had something around 100 GM calls...all but two of which were in regards to RMT activity. A while back, certain zones on my server were packed with 20 or more RMT fishing bots. One of my prouder moments was getting two bots with the Lu Shang's Rod, very valuable, banned. At that time, I also made a point of making at least one GM call per day to report these activities. At one point, when a GM refused to do anything, I got in a 15 minute argument, ultimately asking him if he believed that 20 characters of the same model, names like "Adssekhfge," same gear, same level, 1 with no sub job, all performing the same activity 24/7 could possibly represent some sort of legitimate activity. I will say that I also suggested to Square that all fishable regions have roaming monster that would be aggressive to these obvious cheats. I won't say I'm personally responsible for the introduction of the "Goblin Bountyhunter," but I'd like to think that I at least helped. With all of that said, I think that

> Square has done a very good job in the last year or two in severely damaging the RMT market in *FFXI*.

Arthur challenged the GMs to take action against this particular form of goldfarming that involved a "fish bot." However, reporting suspected goldfarming is problematic when using the assumptions I previously discussed since they in no way show any evidence of actual money exchanging hands for virtual money. Arthur also took pride in being able to ban the accounts of two fish bots that held a very valuable piece of equipment (the coveted Lu Shang's rod). For him, this added insult to injury because not only were the accounts banned, but the fishing rod was a considerable loss of virtual currency (if sold, it was valued at 4 million gil during this time on most servers). Furthermore, Arthur's fervor in reporting to the GMs may have had an effect on how the game's creator (in this case Square-Enix) chose to handle the fish bot epidemic. The Goblin Bountyhunter was a mob that would spawn in fishing areas and attack characters. If the character was being controlled by a bot, it would not run away and simply continue to fish (resulting in the character's death).

Other players have found reporting to the GMs to be far less fruitful because the identifiers were not conclusive as Freya experienced in her reports:

> GMs are hard to report gilfarmers to, you have to be really careful with how you report it, like make it look as if the gilfarmer was botting the monster claims and farming. I have found that if I mention that a character has very rigid or robotic movement like a program was running the character and not a human, they're more likely to investigate the actions of the character. But now since the STF was launched, a GM is more likely to shove your opinion dildo up your ass, log out and contact the STF since you can't do it through the *FFXI* console.

Some players explained the difficulty in reporting suspected goldfarming behavior. The suspicions only gained merit when they are couched in other behaviors that violate the ToS, such as programs that control avatars in place of players. Reporting that an avatar may be using a hack or bot encouraged the GM to monitor said avatar and allowed for the accumulation of evidence that might merit a ban. Simply reporting suspicions of goldfarming provided nothing substantial to the claim since the assumptions were based on the players' xenophobic understanding of how to identify goldfarmers, which often neglected alternative explanations and were at best, arbitrary.

Informal Sanctions and PK

The majority of players decided to take the sanctioning of goldfarmers into their own hands (or into their avatars' hands as it were). The vociferous objects to goldfarming in the player base manifested into xenophobic justifications and virtual harassment that ran the gamut from racial epithets such as "you make me sad panda" to the more preferred venue of PKing. Beck explained:

> I had great pleasure in making their lives miserable. PKing use to be so easy for a bst and its pretty easy for a smn as well (classes in the game) and gilsellers were very easy to spot targets. One player controlling six results in a very large, slow responding target if they tried to sleep an add, I'd dia it [a spell] if they lost claim on a monster, mainly an nm for a second I'd claim it, forcing dragons to flail [a high damage attack]if they managed to out claim the hnm ls's.

Beck detailed the multiple ways a single player could seek retribution against suspected goldfarmers. Players noted that certain jobs are well equipped for PKing because they can manipulate mobs in a given area and force or trick them into attacking the goldfarmers.

Beck also stated that he attempted to make the goldfarmers' game experience (or possibly their farming rate) more difficult by stealing their mobs, aggravating larger kills to do more damaging abilities and anything else that might kill one of the goldfarmers or at least slow their accumulation of currency and items. Gin, resonated:

> I kill them when I can. Or otherwise just generally screw with them. Just annoyances like they've plagued me with through the years. Granted it's a lot harder to PK anymore. But just things like camping on top of them, or killing their exp mobs if they're exping. Had a friend chainspell escape them [port them] before when they had claim on an NM. They're not too bright. The friend just said "please invite me" and they did...haha.

The game creators, in response to frequent PKing, had changed the game to make PKing more difficult. Because of this, some players resorted to other means to harass goldfarmers. Camping over other parties and stealing experience mobs are generally considered inconsiderate practices because it slows the leveling process. However, when used to disrupt goldfarmers it is reframed as doing the server (if not the virtual world itself) a favor because the less powerful the goldfarmer avatars are the less likely they will succeed in gathering currency.

Gin also discussed another commonly held belief which was that goldfarmers are “not too bright.” As mentioned previously, goldfarmers were considered to be the "worst" in terms of playing ability. The player base in *FFXI* stratified playing ability by solid world status: JP players were considered the best of the best, NA players were so-so to solid, “EU” (European) players held the next rung due to not having had the game for long, and lastly the “gilsellers” were considered the worst. These stereotypes divided the player base against each other, binding solid world regional location to a reflection of virtual world capability. Taylor (2006) has noted that this has created a push towards more segregation in virtual worlds in the form of “regional”

servers and an increase in “instanced” game play.

Game Balance

The arguments of both the players who condemned goldfarmers and the game creators who attempted to ideologically separate the virtual world from the solid world framed goldfarming as harmful to the balance of the game. Both deployed this justification as being corrupted by RMT and goldfarming practices because, as Castronova (2005) argues, part of the fun in online games results from competition under *equal opportunity*. The introduction of RMT and goldfarming into the game environment and economy creates unbalance, and resources became available to players through these practices that would not have been available otherwise. Laike argued:

> I think the line is drawn when you actually start selling your resources outside of the game itself. Well, part of it is just that outside influence of that nature upsets a natural economy. If everyone played the game "the way it was meant to be played," then eventually we would reach equilibrium of sorts. There would be economic growth in the sense that people eventually acquire more money, and there would be inflation, since people have more money to spend or can demand more money for items or services. Not dissimilar to the real world. Having people that buy or sell gold for cash upsets that balance dramatically. You're effectively creating money out of thin air, and driving inflation up faster than it ought to go.

Laike invoked the “game balance” justification as a reason to prohibit goldfarming. The in-game economy in virtual worlds is not unlike the ones of the solid world, and also remains inextricably attached to its solid world counterparts (Castronova 2005; Dibbell 2006; Heeks 2008).

Players often lamented over the perception that the in-game economy had been “broken”

by goldfarming or had at least suffered from dramatic inflation. Regardless of players misunderstanding of economics (Castronova 2005; Heeks 2008), the antagonism toward goldfarmers festered from players' assessments of the virtual world economy and failing efforts to maintain the membrane between them. Similarly, Vincent said:

> Yea, the gilsellers are horrible in *FFXI*. My first HNM LS used to fight with them over gil pops all the time. They would even follow us around, if we were running to a NM camp they would gather there too, like they never got their own ToDs, just watched other LSs…Honestly, I hate them, a lot. They totally ruined *FFXI*. They started selling sky [an end game zone] items like right in Jeuno [a town] there would be some character shouting "Byakko Haidate 15Mil" which is an Ex item, which means there were forcing some player to pay to come get the drop, which they would turn around and sell the gil for money.

Goldfarmers were often blamed for changing the way the game was played and the access to certain coveted virtual items. Vincent mentioned that goldfarming groups became bothersome when his LS sought high level kills. Because goldfarming groups were killing and farming for actual money, the perception was that they changed the in-game competition, and pitted "workers" against "players."

Furthermore, players noted rare items such as the "Byakko Haidate" (which were only received as a drop if a character was participating in the killing of the "god" mob "Byakko") were being sold in-game for currency to later be converted into actual money. This meant that the experiences of play became commodities and that a player could purchase a fight with a "god" for the item drop without understanding the accomplishment of the fight itself or even participating in the battle. In other words, the goldfarmers played (i.e., "worked") the game for

the players, at least the difficult and boring parts, for a price, which was framed as "ruining" the game. Beck resonated:

> Scum of the earth, period. They are ruining game play, competing against regular players for monsters that don't pop often or for commonly farmed items things worth money in game they ruin the in game economy by making it harder for normal players to find a niche and they don't care about playing fair because they are getting paid to be there and they don't have to live with the consequences of making a bad name for their character. They are scum of the earth…their actions ruin the game it's their employers that are the real enemy and any way to slow their ability to make money is a win for the home team.

It may be that game creators have resorted to dividing the player base in response to the treatment of goldfarmers in MMORPGs. Being identified as a goldfarmer was a significant social affliction in most MMORPGs. Consequences ranged from being reported to the game's creators, becoming a target of racist language and virtual killings, or being rejected within the virtual community. Though negative responses varied, players who condemned goldfarming were far more concerned with *what goldfarmers did and not who goldfarmers were.*

EXCUSING GOLDFARMING

Not all players proclaimed that goldfarmers were problematic or deserved such condemnation. Interestingly, those who chose to ignore goldfarming or acknowledges it as permissible attempted to promote an understanding that the solid world lives of goldfarmers were harsh (assuming they were forced to work in sweatshops), that the buying and selling of virtual loot was an inevitability in any online game (and could be advantageous in some contexts), and that the perception of goldfarmers was somewhat misguided and more than just

"Chinese goldfarmers" were participating in selling virtual goods.

Harsh Reality

Players who were especially sympathetic toward goldfarmers marshaled the harsh reality of goldfarmers' lives outside the game as reason to excuse them from any perceived negative effects they had on the virtual world. Junpei explained his relationship with a goldfarmer he knew in game:

> Most of these people in China are not wanted. They are people on the streets and their families disown them cause of the Chinese one baby law. I feel bad for them and I help a few of my RMT friends if they need it. There is this one Chinese lady, she lives on the street; she plays to make money to eat. Their work gives them food and a place to stay while working, that's why they like it. I feel bad for them, the players, but not for the corporation that makes them do that. I have mixed feelings about it. I can't be a savior to all of them and get them gil, and I don't want to waste all my time helping them to make all their lives better, but I feel bad for them and try to help when I can. The one lady RMT, she needed my help with an illness she has because I worked in pharmacy, and she asked me for advice…I helped her teleport people for a bit. I don't believe in giving handouts, but I helped. I invited the people and took the gil and she ported them so it was fast. In the end, I gave her all the gil we made. I even got a picture of her.

Some players claimed the solid world conditions of goldfarmers (who again were assumed to be Chinese) had to be considered in deciding whether goldfarming was permissible. Some negotiated mixed feelings about being conscious of goldfarmers' living and economic conditions with desiring to preserve the gaming experience. Regardless of the accuracy of players' perceptions of China, players who were more likely to excuse goldfarming used these

perceptions to justify doing so.

Taking into account solid world conditions in the virtual world served to weave the social fabric and further validate hyper-resonance play which contrasted the discourse of the game creators and the players who sought to maintain the virtual world's "purity." Players who excused goldfarmers cared more about *who they were and not what they did.* Yuri, an 18-year-old SM/VW player in *FFXI* stated:

> Hmm, well I'm against them for sure. They spoil the game for others. But on the other hand, it's like a sweatshop business in China, its people trying to provide for themselves and their family so while I'm against the principles of their work their reasons for doing so are good.

Players commented similar discord between their desire to ensure their game experience remained pleasurable, and their misgivings about the goldfarming business model (Heeks 2008). Players who held these perceptions were less likely to report goldfarmers to GMs and chose more often to ignore or assist goldfarmers rather than harass or PK them.

Utility and Assimilation

Some players took a proactive step and established relationships with goldfarmers that were mutually beneficial or dabbled in RMT themselves. These utilitarian approaches established goldfarmers as a reality of the virtual world and promoted their commercial aspects. Some players believed that goldfarmers could mitigate some of the more arduous tasks in MMORPGs (reducing grinding and allow greater access to resources), and that they had created paths for regular players to profit from play by building the foundations for cyberwork, which included parent sites like IGE (a RMT website). In effect, this had streamlined the process of RMT and whetted demand for virtual goods and services among the player base. Cerberus

explained:

> It's an interesting job, all you do is exploit a resource in the game for money and then move on or completely monopolize it and control it as you see fit. It was interesting to watch them get better and better at the game dynamics. We joked about this one person being involved with them. They were almost our middle man on some stuff, like if the LS wasn't planning to do sky for a long time, and you leveled a job that needed a certain sky gear, you could coordinate a purchase with them. That was kind of nice.

Some players attempted to reframe the goldfarmer presence in the game as somewhat beneficial. Establishing "middle men" between guilds and some known goldfarmers provided players with access to items and goods that guilds were no longer actively seeking.

Instead of harassing and denouncing goldfarmers for allowing easy access to some game items, this enabling perspective remained positive and claimed goldfarmer "connections" circumvented aspects of the game that were difficult or provided an option to obtain gear that was otherwise impossible through other means:

> Player A: Did you get the drop?
>
> Player B: they're killin him now
>
> Player C: u r paying for this?
>
> Player B: aye
>
> Player D: wait paying for what?
>
> Player B: Seiryu's Kote, 20mil
>
> Player A: {Holy}…
>
> Player B: better than waiting for us to do sky again (*From author's fieldnotes*)

Some players not only excused goldfarmers in the virtual world, but decided to benefit directly

from selling goods themselves. Asgard, who had quit and restarted *FFXI* twice, explained:

> I'm kind of neutral about it. When I quit *FFXI* for the first time, I sold my Lu Shang's rod on the AH (auction house) and then sold the four mil gil for about $850 US dollars, so I've benefitted from it...I went on the site and got a quote and then pressed a submit button saying I'd like to sell my gil and they said to be online for the next half hour and wait for a message from somebody and then they come on and asked me to mail it to someone, this was before SE banned the mailing of more than 100,000 gil at a time, a couple hours later they paypal'd me the money.

Players both utilized goldfarmers within the game to access certain items and battles for a price and used RMT websites that exchanged the currency to sell their own virtual loot for cash. Players typically used a parent sites (for example, IGE) to sell currency they made in-game. The idea that *anyone* could sell currency and benefit reduced some of the negative perceptions of goldfarmers.

Additionally, players noted that perceptions of goldfarmers were not entirely accurate. Sano, a 24-year-old SM/VW player in *WoW*, proclaimed:

> I think when they spam you in game they are annoying, other than that I don't mind. Blizzard is just mad that someone else is making money off their game. I know everyone says "Chinese farmer" but they really have no proof that the people are Chinese. I think it is a bunch of white guys who didn't want to get real jobs.

Any player had the potential to participate in RMT, although the profitability of doing so has various outcomes (Dibbell 2006; Heek 2008). In essence, goldfarmers had opened possibilities for cyberwork (Heeks 2008) to all players (albeit somewhat more capitalistic ones). Furthermore, this perception highlighted that game creators have a large stake in the discourse surrounding

goldfarmers. The fact that all types of players were utilizing the virtual world for tangible money provoked game creators to take action. Interestingly, the similarities between the game creators (who created a virtual world for money) and the goldfarmers (who played in the virtual world and made money) might ideally create a mutually beneficial relationship, but instead birthed the opposite.

CONCLUSION

There are several challenges facing a future of hyper-resonance and virtual ubiquity in respect to RMT activities. First, the techniques and "evidence" used to racialize and label goldfarmers are deeply flawed. Players who are intent on applying blame for a spiraling virtual economy use seemingly arbitrary attributes of an avatar coupled with an offensive "English only" standard to determine whether a character is a goldfarmer (Castronova 2005, 2007; Dibbell 2006; Taylor 2006; Yee 2009). Seeking someone to punish, players overlook alternative explanations and brand other players as "harmful" to the virtual world and therefore, unwanted. This fragments game worlds with suspicion and hinders fun by excluding certain players from being involved in many collaborative activities and group play. The assumption that China is the "land of a thousand goldfarmers" (Dibbell 2006) has subjected some Chinese players, who populate many virtual worlds (Ernkvist and Strom 2008; Heeks 2008; Nardi 2010) to verbal harassment and virtuo-physical violence.

Second, this stereotyping highlights the fear and prejudice that remains in game worlds as players attempt to exclude and ostracize suspected goldfarmers using their own or game creators' means and justifications (Heeks 2008; Nardi 2010; Yee 2009). Players sometimes publically denounce or shout at goldfarmers in chat logs knowing that the virtual community is largely

intolerant of RMT. Players exclude suspected goldfarmers from participating in the cooperative elements of the game itself, labeling them outcasts and disallowing their participation in group activities or in joining guilds. The deployment of the PK is the extreme form of attempting to exclude goldfarmers and elevates the harassment to a violent level, that is, a virtual murder. There is palpable danger in this xenophobic perspective, as players are upholding an ideology that sees the goldfarmers as less than players and by extension, not as human (Chou and Feagin 2008; Kohatsu et al. 2011; Le Espiritu 1997; Gilroy 1987; Omi and Winant 1986; Tatum 2000; Zubrei 2001).

Game creators are faced with a shift towards hyper-resonance which will possibly call into question who owns virtual goods (Balkin 2004; Castronova 2005; Dibbell 2006; Klang 2004; Papagiannidis, Bourlakis, and Li 2008; Yamaguchi 2008). Deciding who owns virtual loot or if the players own the time they spend playing, has sweeping consequences for the lives of many avatars and many virtual worlds (Castronova 2005; Dibbell 2006). There is little doubt that virtual loot has value (virtual services as well) and the economics of both worlds are intimately connected if not inseparable (Castronova 2005). The challenge to the game creators is whether they ardently uphold the rhetoric of the ToS (this is a fantasy game, nothing here belongs to the players) or will they have to relinquish their monopoly as the future marches towards hyper-resonance, which, arguably, may grant players the rights to their time and goods. If game creators lean toward the former, there could be a strong push for segregating access to virtual worlds by region, which only serves to preclude cross-cultural exposure. Additionally, rigid enforcement of the ToS may lead to numerous accounts being banned (as it has for *FFXI*), which ultimately reduces the players in the game, and may dissuade new players from starting the game.

Ideally, creators and players could combine efforts to foster a safe and fun gaming experience that would incorporate and legitimatize RMT. MMORPGs could be designed with the interplay of solid and virtual worlds economics in mind, and could allow for any player to have equal opportunity to participate in RMT, which would uphold one of the reasons games are fun (Castronova 2005; McGonigal 2011). Designing an in-game mechanism that allowed players to convert virtual loot into solid world cash would both legitimate RMT activity (reducing the stigma), and blend solid world reward with virtual world fun. Conversely, players who wanted more in-game currency could utilize the same mechanism to purchase virtual loot with solid world cash. Additionally, game creators could ensure they received a dividend for each transaction and virtual worlds could become an equal opportunity fun *and* work place. Designers and players need to reassess how virtual worlds have failed to foster safe fun in respect to RMT, and push game designs and experiences towards new, innovative tactics that do not discriminate between play and work (Castronova 2005, 2007; Dibbell 2006; Heeks 2008; McGonigal 2011; Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006; Yee 2009).

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSIONS

The origins of gaming were rooted in a male-dominated pastime that was socially disconnected, constrained by technology, and largely infantilized by the dominate culture (Chatfield 2010). Because of this, "gamers" became a collective identity that assumed similar social categories were held by those claiming said identity, which forged a rather exclusive group of young, (assumed) heterosexual, white, men and boys (Chatfield 2010). Although there may have been some reality to this construct (Yee 2009), "gamers" today have become a much broader social category (McGonigal 2011; Nardi 2010; Yee 2009). However, the previous collective identity and those who claimed it may well feel threatened by, if not simply resistant to, the changes wrought by technological innovations and massively appealing and accessible gaming experiences. Gaming has attracted a broader audience including women, individuals with sexually fluid identities, casual players, and cyberworkers. This change in the spectrum of social identities has combined with a serendipitous number of events, including more widely available internet access and the emergence of MMORPGs, which are, as their name implies, massive multiplayer experiences.

Now, many people are meeting in virtual worlds for play, and there has been a resurgence of the "gamer" collective identity which seeks to label those not rooted in the original construct as "non-gamers" and therefore, not as appreciated or not perceived as "real" gamers. This has set into motion a number of practices in game worlds where those claiming to be gamers attempt to erode these "others'" inclusion in the gamer social category. Many of their

justifications are that these others *are* different and should be treated as such (women, cyberworkers, etc.). Furthermore, some self-appointed "real" gamers attempt to implement these demarcation practices by interactionally defining the social categories that set these others apart. Moreover, "malestream" gamers may move to exclude these others in more complete ways by harassing them, questioning their dedication, and by extension, presence in the virtual world, or simply attempting to ban and PK them.

Castronova (2005, 2007) and McGonigal (2011) argue convincingly that games are more fun than reality. Arguably, all games are literally built for fun, by so called "happiness engineers," and this casts the solid world at a loss to compete (Castronova 2005, 2007; McGonigal 2011). However, gamers and non-gamers alike can both benefit from increased social bonding, more meaning, hopes of success, and greater productivity (McGonigal 2011), which gamers commonly experience in virtual worlds such as the ones in MMORPGs. Unfortunately, the gamer identity itself seems to be at odds with including more players than previously thought to fit into the category of "gamers."

This reality is grossly overlooked by both the technopoly fear discourse that identifies technology, with its almost inevitable attack on culture, as the problem that must be resisted (Postman 1992; Turkle 2011; Young 2004). At the same time, the techoptimists that glean many of the positives of gaming, rely on essentialist notions of human happiness (McGonigal 2011), completely ignoring that game experiences are not fun and enjoyable for everyone. The former (the technopoly discourse) calls for vague and uncertain (as well as increasingly improbable) social action (read: resist technology before all people become so dependent upon it they cannot live without it). The latter (the techoptimists) details the great potential of games for reality, while bracketing that one of the great benefits of most games, that they are social, can erode all

of that potential during play. Although game designs and directives for increasing fun, access, and sustainability of gaming benefits are important tasks, this dissertation has argued that gamers themselves are a significant barrier to realizing and harnessing the potential of games for reality.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Arguably, due to the adherence to a hyper-resonance standard, many players fail to treat the game world, as well as the players within it, as a space with dynamic styles of play. To *play the game within the game as a game* would imply that in addition to different bodies (e.g. avatars, lalafells, elves, etc.) players could embrace alternate identities (beyond the default mythology, as in, the fantasy world itself) and embody different genders, races perspectives, and even understandings of reality. This would not require the game be treated as "simply play" (Vandenberg 1998), but that many of *fluidity potentials* (i.e., the blurring and broadening of solid world social categories) are dispersed in hyper-resonance. Because many hypers mandate transparency in social categories, or seek to apply them through interactional processes, players who do not meet the "gamer" stereotype are often undermined simply through conformation of solid world social categories. In essence, by upholding this form of transparency, many gamers move to label non-gamers more readily and in the process undermine the collaborative and dynamic potential of game worlds. This may indicate that many players desire to present only their “true selves,” that they lack interest in experimentation, or that the novelty of experimentation has evaporated as virtual worlds have become more accessible (Carroll 2005), which further indicates a future of hyper-resonance. Gaming worlds, then, have largely squandered the potential to create fantasy worlds with more fluid social categories in favor of reconstructing the rigid preexisting ones from the solid world. The implications for

reconstruction rather than revolution for the future of virtual worlds and technology in general may have begun to close the door to a more post-human existence (Haraway 1991).

In respect to gender, this calls for creativity in avatar creation and revolutionary approaches to game design (Castronova 2007; McGonigal 2011; Nardi 2010). While design elements and practices are not at the center of discussion in this dissertation, game designs that target an assumed all-male, heterosexual audience continues to construct virtual bodies that reinforce assumed gender differences (Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006). If game creators continue to create hypersexualized bodies, and the virtual world continues to be pushed toward hyper-resonance, then women and men will continue to be pigeon-holed in these, for lack of a better word, "unrealistic" embodiments. Beyond bodies, the extreme bifurcation of expressions and displays of avatars may be problematic and may exaggerate perceived gender differences (virtual and solid). These "emotes" are predicated on the socialized displays of femininity and masculinity, which, as argued by gender scholars, hold that women are not to take up space and are to be coy, innocent, quiet and sexy while men are to exude dominance, lack emotionality, and be boisterous (Connell 1987, 1995; Kimmel 2003; Lever 1976, Martin 1998). However, avatars *are* important. Some research has shown how gamers and non-gamers alike are more motivated, invested, and respond emotionally to the maintenance and even "happiness" of their avatars (McGonigal 2011; Yee 2009). Because of this, game creators must adapt to the changing gamer landscape, realizing the era of the angsty teenage boy has dispersed and to refocus on meaningful design that does not hinge on the ability to graphically render and depict hypersexualized women's bodies (e.g., designer roles dedicated to rendering women's breasts and buttocks are simply derisive, see Turkle 2011).

As we move almost inevitably toward an era of virtual ubiquity, MMORPGs and other

virtual worlds represent templates that may birth future realities. The current cultural gender binary creates and reinforces qualitatively different experiences for women and men in games and beyond games. Men are forced to be independent, willful, competitive, casting other men as invalid or ineffective in game worlds (epeen masculinity). Women are equally confronted by issues of being cast as objects, encouraged to be dependent on men, and denied autonomy (goddess paradox), and both these realities have had and will have profound impact on everyday social realities. Arguably, if women want to play and enjoy playing, more games and spaces will be made for women. This does not mean that women and men desire significantly different gaming and virtual world experiences, but to highlight that these spaces have embodied male-fantasies and male-standards. The call for the evolution of game worlds beckons both interactional relationships between players as well as institutional (game creators and companies) actors to reopen the door to a virtual revolution. The danger in modeling future game experiences from current MMORPG worlds may crystallize the gender stereotypes and behaviors that are being enacted within them. Once standardized as "the gaming experience," they might become so deeply woven into the ethereal realm that those who inhabit virtual worlds will continue to believe the social arrangements within are simply the way things are and the way they should remain, dismissing the way they could be.

The advent of immersive worlds and overwhelming “real” virtual experiences also allows a reassessment of sexuality and sexual identity. Cybersex blurs the cultural understandings of the body, of what counts as sex(ual), and of how people can be sexual. Gaming experiences on the horizon may incorporate solid bodies into virtual world experience, or, more likely, the two may become indistinguishable. Game worlds may become an unavoidable, even routine, part of life. In the wake of gaming innovations, an ethereal sexuality may become a new emergent collective

identity. Solid bodies and the attributes used to categorize them and restrain desire may loosen as sexual experiences may no longer involve physical touch or even other solid world bodies. *Rin: Daughters of Mnemosyne* depicts a virtual world in which players log in and have sex with different programmed partners who could have solid world counterparts or could be completely synthetic. Players select desired attributes, outfits, and the setting of the tryst, and all of it is "virtual" in the sense that is part of "2.0" and not the solid world. In fact, the player never moves in the solid world at all. Defining this form of sexual identity is beyond this social moment, but the template for these experiences can be seen in the vagueness of current cybersexual interactions. Moreover, the resistance of players in game worlds to this nebulous new form of pleasure provokes players to label those who dabble in cybersex as disrupting the purpose of the game, or to problematize the cybersex itself, using gender and sexuality conventions that restrain both men and women's access to sexual pleasure.

Finally, the virtual world is not only inhabited by those desiring to access the benefits of playing games (Castronova 2005; Heeks 2008). Cyberworks, in their various forms (farmers, power levelers, and so on), have in some ways further blurred the lines between work and play. Although the solid world realities and issues of economic necessity are important factors in these cyberworkers participation in game worlds (Heeks 2008), more curiously is how the resistance from game creators and players confronts and antagonizes cyberworkers. Game creators, having vested interest in their own profit and protection of their intellectual property rights, create a framework in which cyberworkers are deemed unwanted. However, players themselves seem preoccupied with reinforcing the goldfarmer-as-Chinese player stereotype and excluding them from the virtual world. While the solid world trade of virtual currency has created dynamics that changes the rules of fun and access to certain goods (Castronova 2005, 2007; Taylor 2006),

resisting cyberwork erodes the possibilities of forging more interwoven work and play experiences. Although a resolution to this problem will require some legal reassessments, game experiences have the potential to create virtual jobs and a virtual economy that more players can access and radically shift what people do for work.

In laying a rigid and dysfunctional foundation, the benefits of gaming are arguably diminished and reduce the number of potential participants as well as the latitude in fantastical creations. Although there is considerable concern for monitoring the exodus into virtual worlds (Castronova 2007), this dissertation has argued that hyper-resonance itself may in many ways circumvent the prediction of exodus. This is because the worlds may become more akin to a large interconnected nexus, and less similar to a vacuum in virtual space where players exodus to escape reality. If the nexus of hyper-resonance and virtual ubiquity is the future, then the foremost concern of gaming and of gamers is ensuring that the benefits of play are equally accessible to all who wish to participate.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The interactionist and constructionist frameworks guiding this study allowed this dissertation to embody a fluid position in respect to social categories and explain the processes by which they reemerge and how they are maintained within virtual worlds. Interactions online are still heavily text-based, but also incorporate an implosion of levels of interaction. Although a lesser thrust of this research, some of the data highlight how players manage to multitask interaction (Jackson 2008; Turkle 2011), allowing them to participate and critically comment through different venues. Arguably, interactions in game worlds are simultaneously more and less filtered. This was evident in my experiences witnessing some of the filtered voices of

players while also being privy to the unfiltered versions in private interactions (e.g., players talking to me in tell while talking to the guild, when the messages themselves were seemingly contradictory). This reality is more difficult to grasp in the solid world. Although interactionism has theorized there are multiple levels on which people engage in "performing" social life (Goffman 1959), some of this is compartmentalized into interpsychic spaces during a performance. In virtual worlds, players could enact multiple dramas, possibly sharing more of their solid world selves with more audiences, and within less time, than would be possible in the solid world. It may be possible as the virtual and solid worlds become more interconnected that future social interactions are primarily "clustered," in that people participate in multiple interactions simultaneously, and thus experience new forms of complexity and impression management (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Jackson 2008).

Interactionism also highlights in online worlds how gender, sexuality, and race/nationality are, at least in part, controlled through talk and relationships (even in the absence of bodies or proofs of identity), and many players believed they could understand who someone was by how they interacted and by how they played the game (i.e., the body/behavior assumption, see Kendall 2000, 2002). In essence, players were actively engaged in constructing reality, quite literally, both in that the meanings of their interactions shaped their experiences of the worlds (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959) and in that players were tirelessly rebuilding what they believed they knew about solid world life (e.g., behaviors and capacities of each gender). They expected interactions were predictable (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Mead 1962; Ridgeway 1997; Riseman 1998; Wharton 2008), and actively engaged in methods to ensure their expectations were correct (e.g., deploying the Manthra Tales to continue the process of vetting for women, which ensured players would not attempt to bend gender, which ensured most

players would be transparent in social categories, which in turn allowed players to treat the social categories differently and as they would in the solid world, which reinforced any perceived difference between women and men).

However, the nod to human agency that interactionism has identified with (i.e., people are active participants and behavior is not completely determined by structural forces) did not seem well supported in this work. It seemed apparent that even if the potential for fluidity and change existed, people are heavily invested in synthesizing an understandable pattern to behaviors (Blumer 1969; Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1959; Mead 1962; Ridgeway 1997; Riseman 1998; Wharton 2008). Unfortunately, these patterns and expectations, even if players were technically a part of the process that produced them, often simply reflected existing stereotypes and expectations in broader solid world structures and institutions. Although some "resistant" exceptions were identified (e.g., hybrids and fusers), the evidence was minimal at best. Arguably, what is particularly damaging are the belief systems about gender, sexuality and other social categories that, once internalized, are actively pursued as truths, and are reconstructed through great effort in an attempt to affirm what players already believe they know (Berger and Luckman 1967; Seidman 2003; Wharton 2008).

A particular contribution of this dissertation is that it is one of few exploratory, inductive works on MMORPGs. Much of the extant research on MMORPGs, although still sparse, has employed more quantitative approaches (Yee 2009), or examined other areas of interest such as virtual economics (Castronova 2005, 2007; Heeks 2008) and identity play (Turkle 1999, 2011). Nardi's (2010) work on *WoW* is the most similar to my own, however, our interests in the virtual worlds are arguably quite different. While all forms of research in this relatively new social arena are beneficial to increasing general knowledge, descriptively rich and scholarly rigorous work in

MMORPGs attempts to digest these massive experiences for audiences completely unfamiliar with the depth of these worlds (non-gamers and academics alike). This is a challenging task, and although my work is far from exhaustive, it arguably provides the deepest and richest empirical work on MMORPGs in that it utilized both the strengths of modern qualitative works as well as my insider role and knowledge.

Finally, this dissertation has crafted the "language of resonance," which arguably allows for a deeper and richer theoretical understanding of the social realities of virtual worlds. World resonance ideologies hold explanatory power beyond game worlds in that they illuminate the practices of many social interactions that cross and blend worlds (e.g., social networking sites, online dating, and so on). Understanding a social actor's adherence to a level of world resonance frames how one attempts to control or freely shares personal information in highly connective virtual spaces, which has implications for larger discussions of public (visible) and private (confidential) virtual spaces and interactions.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Despite the unique contributions of this dissertation, it is not without limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, there is a dearth of comparison studies of MMORPG experiences that are created in different solid world spheres. The gaming industry is widely acknowledged to be split into "western" (NA/EU) and "eastern" (JP/Korean) game designs, mechanics, and styles. Although my sample does include games from these different spheres (*WoW* versus *FFXI* and *FFXIV*), more research should be conducted that details how these games are perceived within the solid world spheres in which they are played. These effects arguably change the "migration" of different gamers to different virtual worlds and thus augment

the virtual landscape through the perception of "better game design" that is situated in the particular game cultures of these somewhat distinct regional spheres.

Second, different solid world cultures likely frame virtual world experiences differently. Because my research was constrained by my own personal linguistic and geographic limitations, I cannot accurately assess how gamers in different regions of the solid world process the identity politics of the virtual world. Nardi (2010: 179) has discussed some of this at length in noting that Chinese players tend to play MMORPGs while together in the solid world, for example at the "wang ba" (a type of internet cafe). In this way, Chinese players are dissimilar to most of the informants in my study (barring the couples who played together in the same room) because technology and the wang ba actually promote solid world connectivity and render any need for constructing solid world categories through the virtual world, moot (physical proximity and solid world visual cues are all available while playing at the wang ba).

A third limitation is that my sampling and settings likely ignored some populations of gamers. Because I was invested in gaining rapport for disclosure, I attempted to spend time with my informants. This technique vastly ignores more "sporadic" gamers, that is, players who may not inhabit game worlds for very long or infrequently. Additionally, I did not spend ample amounts of time on any dedicated RP servers, which may embody greater resistance to hyper-resonance and more identity play. Although I did interview players who had experimented with RP in their online game histories, more observational data on these settings could be beneficial to provide a deeper understanding of the elements and justifications necessary for more fluidity in play.

Furthermore, a strong criticism of both interactionism and constructionism is what appears to be their superficiality and theoretical relativity. These positions are somewhat

resistant to the rigid enforcement of social categories, and this creates a dearth in what is presumed to be "known" about any given phenomenon. Because I did not want to assume that fixed social categories were responsible for certain virtual behaviors, I arguably learned less about who the players were than about how they played. Interactionism also largely (intentionally) ignores the structural forces that frame these games. Although I openly acknowledged this, the theoretical picture from this perspective is limited and narrow in that it ignores that the worlds and the elements within them are *built by institutional actors*, possibly with damaging consequences that may lay the foundation for a particular virtual landscape.

Finally, future research could access in more detail how institutional approaches to design are based on player demographics which in turn buttresses the interactional landscape of these worlds. Although the positions and assumptions I utilized were conducive to my focus in this research, as well as the inductive approach of modern qualitative work, some of the benefits of more predictive and deductive approaches which garner their strength from utilizing known realities to understand outcomes and consequences should be incorporated in further research or possibly in tandem with strong qualitative approaches to harness a more complete understanding of these epic worlds and social realities.

GRAND DREAM

The concern for an exodus into virtual worlds is valid in that virtual worlds are built to be more fun than reality (Castronova 2007). However, my dissertation has broadly indicated a future of hyper-resonance rather than exodus. Although one could debate what the form of each actually appears to be and whether they are truly different, I believe efforts for hyper-resonance are well underway that will serve to make reality itself into a game (McGonigal 2011). The

evidence is already apparent: Gamers want to make social bonds, they want to know who the people they play with are, and they want to be immersed on a grand scale. One could reasonably ask: "What grander platform than reality itself?"

ARGs (alternate or alternative reality games) are germinal forms of a hyper-resonance play in the virtual nexus: players are connected and participating with anyone, but the platform is life itself or any aspect of life. Some early ARGs ended in failure because, in part, there was less transparency and blurring of the solid and virtual worlds and more rigidity during the earlier years (i.e., 1999-2005, see McGonigal 2011). ARGs can be rather intrusive in that sense because they force players to play life as a game, and this often requires at least some disclosure of solid world statuses. However, as hyper-resonance becomes more standard, the concept of invasive virtual eyes peering into solid world lives becomes less relevant, which makes ARGs a likely catalyst of the future of life as a game. The anime, *Eden of the East*, licensed for release in the United States in 2009, depicts a near future of ARGs and virtual nexus. The characters of the series have built a virtual database which can be accessed in real time from any phone device. By holding a phone display up to any solid world environment or person, the database can access any information and display it for the user (in this way, the world is complete hyper-resonant and no social categories can be unknown). The beginnings of this form of virtual ubiquity are being sewn by startup companies such as *TagWhat*,[13] which are effectively synthesizing the solid world with the virtual nexus to allow people to experience more from reality.

In the same vein, I played my first ARG about six months ago. The best aspect of this

[13] *TagWhat* is a "social augmented reality" which attempts "tag" solid world sites with virtual information. For example, the phone display can be held up to a solid world site such as a building and tags for that site will be displayed including its history, movies that were filmed there, and so on. In essence, the virtual nexus is transposed on the solid world.

particular game was that I was not sure I was playing anything at all. In fact, I was myself sitting at my computer reading some forum posts and watching a few uploaded videos, but the experience itself was exactly what gamers feel: it was epic. It began as a story, I read short narrative about a college student who had wandered into a garage sale to rummage through the Nintendo 64 (N64) games. He had found one he wanted, *Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, and proceeded to buy it from the owner. However, this owner (described as a creepy old man) told him the game had belonged to another college student who had perished in a car accident, that student's name was Ben. Regardless, the protagonist purchased the N64 game and went home to play, and this is where I, an unknown player in this narrative, began playing the ARG.

Over the next several days, the protagonist claimed the game cartridge was, well, haunted more or less. To embolden his claims, he began posting videos on YouTube of the game, and the content that was frightening him. Most gamers were familiar with this N64 game, so it was not hard to grasp that something was not right about the game itself. The character models were broken, the text would glitch (and sometimes said creepy lines such as "You shouldn't have done that"), his character was killed in various (and impossible) ways, and the game itself seemed to want him to play more, apparently speaking to him through the game text. More importantly, our protagonist had blogged about his palpable fear of the game cartridge, and all the while, I, and hundreds of other gamers were hanging on his every post. The gamers theorized about the possibility of "Ben" (the deceased previous owner) having his soul trapped in the game, some discussed whether it was an elaborate hoax, while others attempted to recreate the game footage to verify its authenticity. Everyone was actively, creatively, engaged. It was intense, it was a game, but it was reality. With this single narrative the protagonist had stirred hundreds of people into a productive, social frenzy of fun.

Other ARGs are more practical and less spectacular (e.g., *Chore Wars* which rewards players in virtual goods for doing household chores and competing with others in their homes, see McGonigal 2011). The premise of ARGs is simply to create a voluntary obstacle in reality, but make it feel like a game. The thrust of ARGs and similar efforts is to create a desire to "play reality" or to be invigorated about "doing life" because reality has been framed as a problem (McGonigal 2011). This means that possibly anyone can become a gamer, and in any aspect of life. Gamer as a social category, then, must change. When the solid world itself, interconnected through virtual ubiquity, becomes a grand dream of reality interwoven with play and game, then *everyone will be a gamer*, and therefore everyone must equally be recognized as a gamer. In doing so, all gamers can take part in the grandest gaming platform known so far: fantastic reality.

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GLOSSARY

/: Either a short signal used to inform a group that a player is ready (to engage a mob, to move on to the next event, etc.) or an emoticon that represents a raised hand in greeting or acknowledgement (if a guild member says "hello" into guild chat after logging on, players may respond with "/" as a way of indicating they are there and acknowledge the logging in member).

/em: The command input that proceeds a customized emote. By typing /em first, players could input whatever text they wished to appear in the emote text rather than other text forms (say, shout). Coupled with macros, players could create unique emotes.

Account: A player's data, identification, and password information used to access the game. Usually corresponds to serial or registration numbers for the game. Accounts hold all avatar data. Accounts can be exchanged, sold, or cancelled. Avatars may be deleted from an account, but the account can remain with open "slots" for new characters to be created. Account limitations vary by game.

Achievements: In *WoW*, some visual or textual recognition of an avatar's accomplishments. They vary in status from the serious "Realm First! Level 80 Human: First human on the realm to achieve level 80" to the frivolous "Drunken Stupor: Fall 65 yards without dying while completely smashed during the Brewfest Holiday."

Add: Short for informing members of a party that an additional mob(s) has begun to attack the group.

Add-ons: Customized programs that have specific functions (usually somehow related to changing the UI or accumulating data). Some add-ons may allow players to see information about the game not available by default and some may serve functions such as calculating the damage an avatar produces over a given time.

AF: In *FFXI*, short for "artifact armor" which was one of many sets of quality armor and involved a series of quests and coffer hunts.

AFK: Away from keyboard. Usually deployed to inform others that a player's avatar is not being controlled (nor will the player be able to acknowledge messages until that player returns to the keyboard).

Aggro: Refers to a mob that has the potential to be hostile toward an avatar ("Do Toads aggro?"). May also refer to this potential as being reached when a mob beings to attack an avatar ("Shit, guys bird aggro"). Jokingly, players may use this term to refer to other unwanted engagements ("I have to go, wife aggro!").

AH: Auction house. In many MMORPGs, the AH is a primary route of buying and selling goods. Some involve blind bidding while others clearly list asking prices.

Alpha: The first playable version of the a game. This is a pre-release version in a very early testing format. Some players wishing to announce their dedication to a game title may make statements that refer to their having "Been here since Alpha."

Alt: Alternate, which denotes an avatar that is not the player's "main." Alts are popular in mono-class MMORPGs because avatars are limited in that they can only access one class (and thus, less of the game's content). Players wishing to see more content or gain a different perspective by playing another class create alts to meet these goals.

AO: "Anarchy Online" a MMORPG.

AOE: Area of effect. This is the area or scope that a spell or ability effects (Arrow Helix, Blizzard, Cure).

Armory: A database for *WoW* in which players (and non-players) can search for characters, view their equipment, talents, stats, and even run audits that provide tips on how to optimize.

Attributes: (also Stats) A numerical representation of an avatar's capacities (Strength, Intelligence, etc.). These demarcate status and can be used to "size-up" the quality of an avatar. Some players may even boast about their avatar's attributes in hopes of being invited into parties or raids because they are framing themselves as superior players.

Avatar or Avi: A term used to refer to the virtual body created and controlled by the player.

Bags: Another term for inventory or the space characters have to carry goods, items, and equipment.

Ban: A punishment for violation of the ToS. GMs are tasked with bannings. When players are banned, their accounts are closed/cancelled and all character data is (presumably) deleted or frozen. This is considered the "worst" punishment for players who violate the ToS. Accounts may be temporarily suspended for a given time if the violation was perceived as less severe.

Bank: A place of storage for additional inventory. Sometimes this refers to an actual bank vault as in *WoW*, but it could also be another game element that function in the same way (Mog House in *FFXI*, or retainers in *FFXIV*).

Battleground: In *WoW*, these are instances dedicated to PvP with varying rewards and goals.

Battle text: The textual record of battles. Information recorded includes actions the mobs take, actions the player takes, actions the party takes, the damage and effects of said actions and so on.

Bazaar: An alternative way to sell and buy goods. Avatars in some games can place items in their bazaar which is usually coupled with a visual element that shows other players they can access the bazaar. Bazaars are limited usually in that the number of items presented in a bazaar at one time are finite and that potential customers must be in close proximity to the avatar with the

bazaar in order to buy and sell.

Benchmark: A program that tests a computer's suitability to run particular games. Benchmark "scores" are discussed as a way of gauging hardware and competing with other players.

Beta: Similar to Alpha, but more broadly distributed. Beta versions of a game are closer to the public release, but can still be discussed in the same terms as reinforcing a player's status in (and by extension, mastery of) the game. Closed betas are more exclusive and require codes to access while open betas require no code and are generally easier to access.

Bind Point: Depending on the game, avatars may be sent to a specific place in the game world when they perish. Players may bind their avatars to crystals, camps, graveyards, and so on. Failure to select a proper bind point in respect to the activities the player is engaging in may result in a very long return trip.

Bio: Usually indicates a player's need to AFK to use the bathroom (although Bio is also a spell in *Final Fantasy* titles).

Blacklist: A function in most MMORPGs where a player can input an avatar's name who is annoying, offensive, dishonest and so on (reasons vary) and all actions, text, emotes from that avatar are now censored from the text box of the player who has blacklisted that avatar. The blacklisted player could continue to send messages and they will *appear* to go through, but the other player will not see the text (in a way, it may appear that the player is not responding). Sometimes it may take several failed interactions for players to recognized they may have been blacklisted (one way of confirming is to involve a third party). In *FFXI*, this sometimes had the interesting outcome of a player attempting to invite another player who was seeking party, but having being blacklisted in the past, the text from the player trying to invite the other would never be received.

BOE: Bind on Equip. In *WoW*, items that BoE are tradable and sellable until they are equipped on an avatar, at which point the item "binds" to that avatar's inventory and can no longer be traded/sold to other avatars (it can, however, be sold to NPCs or discarded).

Booted: Can refer to a player being ousted from a guild or party (in favor of another player or because of a disagreement). It can also denote losing internet connection, server malfunction, game crashes, etc., anything that would interrupt a player's access to the game world.

BOP: Bind on Pickup (also, see Ex). In *WoW*, items that BoP bind the moment the item in placed in an avatar's inventory. These items cannot be traded or sold.

Bot or Botting: A general term for any "illegal" (in the sense that the game creators do not sanction their use) program that would allow an avatar to perform a task beyond its capabilities (for example, speed bots which can enhance an avatar's movement) or perform actions repeatedly without a player's input (for example, a fish bot which allows the avatar to fish repeatedly, bait hooks, and sort inventory streamlining both acquisition of goods as well as fishing skill). Botting

is sometimes conflated with RMT activities, is heavily scrutinized by GMs, and in some cases may be a requirement for players hoping to access the more "elite" communities in game worlds.

Botch: A general term for referring to a failed action in the game. Most often this refers to botching a craft or synthesis (breaking the item).

Brb: Be right back.

Btw: By the way or sometimes "between."

Buff or Buffing: Buffs are spells or abilities that enhance an avatar's attributes. Buffers are classes whose roles are to enhance party members (rather than damage enemies or other class roles). Players may discuss their avatar abilities in terms of being "buffed" or "un-buffed" as a way of accurately relating their max attributes.

Burst: (also Burst Damage). A type of damage dealing that seems to emulate "waves" in that a great deal of damage may be done in a quick burst while some downtime is needed between bursts (for example, to allow abilities to recharge).

Button Mashing: A pejorative term for somewhat archaic game mechanics. Games or classes that are considered less complex are mere button mashing affairs (read: no intelligence or strategy needed).

Camping: More or less, waiting. Camping usually involves waiting for a mob in a certain area to pop to be killed (rare mobs that drop coveted items are often camped regularly). Campers may participate in killing placeholders to assist the pop, or may actively try to discourage other campers through verbal hostility or attempted PKing.

Cap: The design imposed limit of a skill or level. MMORPGs can have cap raises during their lifetime which allows player to further increase the skills and levels of their characters ("They're raising cap from 75 to 80 this month!").

Caps lock: Usually a response to a player who has textually spoken using all caps. Caps are perceived as "yelling" in game worlds, and are generally frowned upon as juvenile.

Casino: A player run money scheme in the game. In *FFXI*, players ran "lotteries" which were a form of gambling. The casino player would accept bets from players and advertise the pay-outs in shout chat. Players would then use a command in game that generated a random number and if the number was within the pay-out parameters the casino player paid the gambler. However, in many cases the casino players accrued untold profit with little effort or accepted bets with no intention of paying winners. This activity was eventually frowned upon by GMs and any player that attempted to run a casino was suspended or banned.

Casters: A term that refers to classes that use magic in some form or another (healing spells, damage spells, buffing spells and so on).

CC: Crowd control. A role some classes embody that requires they manage mobs in specific ways (immobilizing them, distracting them). CC classes help control the flow of battle by managing how many mobs a party has to engage at one time.

Chaining: A flexible term to describe the process of doing something in quick succession (chaining mobs, chaining quests).

Channel: A level of text chat (or possibly voice chat) that is dedicated to some task (Trade, Quests). Players are generally supposed to uphold the purpose of the channel by engaging in conversation congruent with the channel title (obviously, this does not always happen).

Char or Character: A term used to refer to the virtual body created and controlled by the player (interchangeable with avatar).

Chat Log: Generally, the box that holds all text in the game (messages, shouts, battle text). The chat log can be customized in a number of ways by adding filters or changing font colors.

Check: Checking is part of the targeting system that allows a player to view the difficultly of a mob (more commonly called "con") or more likely another character's status, attributes, level, or equipment. In some games, checking another character is seen as disrespectful and invasive. However, games like *WoW* have systems like the Armory which allows a player to check any avatar at any time without having to be in proximity in the virtual world.

Claim: Usually means a particular mob is "claimed" for battle by a party or player. Mobs that are being attacked are usually not "attackable" to any players outside the group that has claim. If players lose claim (by dying, or a glitch in the game), the mob can be claimed by others.

Class: Archetypes of available game roles (also see Jobs). Specific to the genre, avatars embody roles in the game that frame how they develop and how they participate in group play. Typically, these roles include variations of tanks (a role of holding the attention of the mob and thus mitigating damage to other party members), damage dealers (roles involved in damaging mobs at close range or at a distance, possibly working in tandem with other players and incorporating physical or magical damage), healers (the role of keeping other avatars healthy, curing ailments, resurrecting the dead, buffing). Although classes are more specialized in their roles (a Rogue deals damage in a much different way than a Black Mage), the role frames how the players will experience group play as well as learn to understand their class.

Class Mastery: A term used to indicate a player's interpersonal sense of mastering their role or class in the game.

Clocking: Usually some form of recording damage (sometimes players would "add up" their damage to a mob and compare numbers).

Con: Checking and assessing the difficulty of a mob (different games implement textual or

visual markers for this task).

Content: The "stuff" of the game (quests, battles, systems). Players critique MMORPGs largely on the amount and quality of the game content (read: stuff to do).

CD: Cooldown. Spells and abilities, once used, usually have timers that countdown until they become available again. This is the cooldown.

CoH: "City of Heroes" a MMORPG.

Corpse: Death in some MMORPGs leaves a character's body where it was slain forcing players to return to their corpse to be resurrected.

Corpse Camping: Players involved in PvP who slay avatars may camp or even sit on the deceased awaiting the avatar to resurrect in order to kill that avatar again. This is mostly seen as rude and obnoxious behavior, but persists nonetheless.

Corpse Run: (also Ghost Run) The process of returning in ghost or spirit form to one's body.

Crafting: One aspect of many MMORPGs is the ability of avatars to create (craft) items from raw materials. This can be a central component to progressing in the game, a fun time sink, or a source of pride among players (crafting one's own equipment is particularly high-status). Crafting allows players to engage in the virtual economy (selling crafted items) as well as forge bonds with other players (creating something a friend desires).

Crit: "Critical" which usually means a character has landed a "critical hit" on a mob (could be melee or magical). Crits do more damage (varies by game, can be a small increase to double or triple the base amount) and sometimes players may augment their characters to become better at critting.

Damps: A term used to describe players who expend every effort to keep their virtual world lives separate (and possibly different) than their solid world lives. These players are much more fluid in identity construction and may create novel personal narratives in order to participate in the virtual world.

DAOC: "Dark Age of Camelot" a MMORPG.

DC: Disconnected. Usually announced as a player returns to the virtual world ("Sorry, dc >.<") or when a player thinks a dc is imminent ("Damn, I think I'm dcing").

DD: Damage dealer (also direct damage). Refers to the role of a class or ability in the game that is primarily concerned or dedicated to dealing damage to mobs over all else.

Death warp: (also Blood Warp) The act of intentionally killing one's character to port back to a bind point. It is sometimes seen as more cost effective and less time consuming to death warp

than attempt to return intact.

Debuff: Opposite of buffing and usually directed toward mobs. Debuffs reduce attributes, slow attacks and movement and allow the target to become easier to defeat. Some classes embody debuffer roles and are charged with enfeebling enemies.

Dev team: Development team. Usually how players refer and discuss the people who made the game ("Idk wtf the dev team was thinking").

Ding: An announcement for gaining a level. Players may type in guild chat "Ding!" to inform the members they have leveled-up. This is responded to with the almost obligatory "Gratz!" It can also replace level-up in conversation ("My goal is just to ding once tonight then I'm logging").

Dmg: "Damage."

DoT: Damage over time. Refers to spells or abilities that have lasting effects on enemies and "tick" away a mob's health for a set duration. DoTs are a more consistent, less spectacular form of damage dealing when compared to Burst damage.

DPS: Damage per second. A calculation of damage output over time. This may help players choose certain equipment (contrasting stats of different weapons), compare the output of one class to another (which classes have the "best" DPS), or may be involved in developing a battle strategy (what abilities/spells/stats are required for the highest DPS).

Drop: Items that mobs possess. Sometimes in reference to the conclusion of a battle and whether an item was obtained ("Did you get the drop?).

Drop rate: The probability an item that a mob possess will drop. Players critique the appropriateness of drops rates ("The drop rate on the boots sux ass").

Duel: A PvP challenge from one player to another (a request for one-on-one combat). Dueling can be a form of status (taunting and belittling the loser of the duel) or a way players hone their playing skill (creating strategies for optimal outcomes, survivability, or damage output).

Dungeon: A space in the game that sometimes requires organized parties to explore and conquer.

Dynamis: In *FFXI*, a type of instance that was prime end game content, which involved very difficult mobs and rare rewards.

Emote: A virtual gesture performed by an avatar. A number of emotes are programmed into the game to facilitate communication and add unique traits to different avatars (by gender, by race, by class). Some are accompanied with voiceovers.

Emoticon: A textual image to express emotion. Some examples: Respectful Request: m(_ _)m Confusion: (o.O) Anger: (>.<)

End Game: Refers to activities meant for players who have leveled their character to or near max level (a reality that slides and changes with cap increases). End game can involve difficult quests, raids, dungeons, and battles that require large and skilled groups of characters to overcome. After leveling, players may solicit exclusively for "End Game Guilds," which are guilds dedicated to these activities.

Enmity: (also Hate or Threat) Refers to the direction and target of the mob's attacks. Tank classes are charged with "holding hate" or "generating enmity" so that mobs focus on them and ignore more killable classes (for example, healers). Enmity maintenance is a dynamic element of group play. While tanks work to hold hate, other classes are encouraged to monitor their use of abilities and spells as to not "take hate" and subsequently be attacked (or worse killed) by the mob.

Epeen: E-penis. A somewhat pejorative term that mocks players who obsess or boast too much about their virtual achievements, avatars capabilities, gear, etc. Since the internet should somehow be "less real" (or at least less meaningful) than the "real world," players too invested are chastised with this reminder that the game does not "really" count (it is not a real penis). Players who "wave their epeen" are seen as dick waving in a virtual world and in certain (casual) spaces are reminded they are foolish for believing their virtual accomplishments compensate for what are likely their real world shortcomings. Nonetheless, geek men are heavily investing in their epeen masculinity.

Epic: A versatile term used to describe the greatness or intensity of people, events, or things ("That mission was fucking epic!"). In *WoW*, certain gear was deemed of epic quality and was noted with purple text (and coveted by players).

EQ: "Everquest" a MMORPG.

Equip(ment): As a verb, equipping refers to placing items on an avatar such as clothing, weapons, or accessories. Equipment is a broad term for any item that can be equipped and has corresponding stats. Players spend a great deal of time and effort finding appropriate and rare equipment (or gear) and dressing their avatars (some for aesthetics, and some with min-maxing in mind).

EU: "European" or in most cases a reference to a player's region in the solid world ("A EU player wants to join the party").

Event: Usually a holiday or seasonal celebration in MMORPGs accompanied by unique undertakings, equipments, rewards, and so on. The "Startlight Celebration" in *FFXI* and *FFXIV* involved a snow animation falling in most towns, decorations on buildings, unique music in place of the regular scores, and the addition of seasonal items (foods, santa outfits).

Ex: In *FFXI*, Ex items were "exclusive" meaning that once they were obtained by a character they could not be traded or sold.

Expansion Pack: See Xpac.

Experience: A numerical value that tracks a player's progress in points toward "leveling" a character. "Exp" or "XP" is usually rewarded for slaying mobs or completing quests and after so many points have been accumulated a character achieves the next level and the process repeats (higher levels take significantly more Exp to progress through than lower ones).

F2P: "Free to play" or a way to refer to the numerous MMORPGs available that do not require a monthly fee and in many cases are also free to download. Some players view F2P MMORPGs as inferior to subscription based MMORPGs, although this is somewhat a matter of opinion.

Fail: A flexible term that players used to describe literal failure ("Way to fail" was a common remark toward any player faltering at anything from spelling to accomplishing in game tasks). It is also used in place of "suck" in many cases, describing some phenomenon as unimpressive ("Pentathrust fails"). Epic fails were usually very demoralizing outcomes.

Farmer: A character that has been identified as likely to be engaging in farming activity with the intent to profit through RMT.

Farming: The activity of attempting to gather items for in game currency. This can take many forms such as killing mobs for specific drops or gathering materials using skills such as fishing or mining. Farming can be an individual undertaking, become a regular group activity, and possibly even a requirement in some end game content.

FFXI: "Final Fantasy XI" the first MMORPG in the FF series.

FFXIV: "Final Fantasy XIV" the second MMORPG in the FF series.

Filter: Filters are a function of the UI that allow players to eliminate undesired text from chat logs (for example, filtering all emote text would eliminate all messages of "Zek waves" or "Lynneth beckons to you").

Flame: A hostile reaction to a comment. Generally, this terms applies to posts on forums but players can be flamed in channels or chat logs in game.

Forum: The term for message board. Forums can be run by fans, guilds, or game creators. On most forums, players post questions, criticism, seek to recruit members for guilds or events, share screenshots or share their game stories.

Fraps: A video recording program popular among players for recording in game events. Players may "fraps" a battle in game and post the video to share with the game community. Fraps is also used in manufacturing a number of fan videos (farewell videos, proposal videos, etc.).

Friend list (Flist): A social list function in MMOs that allows a player to add the name of a character to a list and be granted the ability to see when that player is logged in by looking at the list (some flists are more comprehensive and may alert the player when a friend has logged in or provide additional details such as where that friend is current in the game world, and what level or class that friend is currently). Some flists require consent of both parties to function while others simple require the name be input correctly.

FTL: "For the Lose" usually a term for disappointment or to say something is not enjoyable ("Rez sickness ftl").

FTW: "For the Win" a popular gamer and internet term to express enthusiasm ("Second Wind ftw") or in a more sarcastic way, simply acknowledge something is recommended or mandatory ("Patch notes ftw!").

Gank: A verb usually deployed when a player surprises another player and kills her or him. "Ganking" became common in *WoW* discussions particularly in respect to Rogues (a class in game).

Gathering: A pass-time or money making activity in many MMORPGs. Gathering could involve mining, fishing, logging, gardening, and more. Players usually invest time in gathering to assist their crafting professions (mining to have mats to blacksmith with) or to sell for currency (chopping wood and selling logs to players through AH or Bazaars).

Geared: Gear is another term for equipment (swords, armor, etc.). Being geared or getting geared usually is a reference to the process of obtaining high quality or epic equipment and thus being perceived as a better player.

Ghey: An (unfortunate) slang term for something being lame or "sucking." Commonly expressed toward any game element that players found disagreeable.

Gil: The virtual currency in *FFXI* and *FFXIV*.

Gimp: Opposite of being geared. Players labeled other players who failed to meet certain gear or attribute standards as "gimps" and in this way reinforced able-bodied privilege through virtual hierarchies of perceived "ability" of avatars.

Glitch: A term for any element of the game malfunctioning in some way. Battles may glitch or skills may glitch with positive or negative results to the player.

GM: Game master, general moderator, etc. Usually indicates the authorities charged with dealing with violations of the ToS or other more trivial complaints (sometimes "gm" can mean guild master as well depending on the game).

GM Jail: The space where characters who violate the ToS are sent to isolate them from the game world as GMs decide the fate of their accounts. Usually a discussion between the GM and

the character takes place in GM Jail until a decision is reached for proper punishment that may involved account suspension or termination.

Goldseller: (Gilseller in *FFXI* and *FFXIV*) The most common term for a player who is involved in RMT as a business.

Gratz: The almost obligatory response to a player announcing a ding or level-up.

Grind: The process of doing something repeatedly such as killing mobs over and over again in order to gain XP, skill, or farm. Many MMORPGs core game play consists of grinding in some way (striking a balance of how much is too much often determines how players view the fun element of the game).

Gtg: "Good to go" as a way of informing a party the player is ready, or "got to go" which is to inform the recipient the player is logging out.

Guilds: A relatively organized group of players who assemble for some common goal. Guilds can lean on the more social/casual side (chatting, hanging out with friends) to the more serious or "end game" side (schedules, consistent raids, rules for applying and being accepted as a member).

GW: "Guild Wars" another MMORPG.

Hacked: Hacking usually refers to account theft ("My account got hacked") or botting programs (such as a speed-hack). Sometimes a short term for melee violence ("Just hack them to death").

Hardcore: An identity some players share where dedication to the game trumps all other obligations (real life, friends, work, school).

Healbot: The role some casters are required to assume during group play. Healbots are primarily concerned with healing and keeping their allies alive. Sometimes players regard this role as feeling one-dimensional even though they are highly coveted in the community.

Health or HP (Hit Points): The numerical value for a character's "life." When HP are depleted (for example, when a mob attacks a character), the character dies. HP usually increase through leveling, wearing certain equipment, and so on.

Heroic: In *WoW*, a more difficult setting for a raid or a dungeon often with greater rewards.

HNM: "High" or "Hyper" or "Huge" NMs. A variation of NMs, usually stronger and more powerful. Some linkshells made hunting HNMs a high priority for their challenge and rare items.

Hoofing: Usually the term for walking in the game world. Since many options for travel become available during play, "hoofing it" is generally to be avoided if possible.

Hotkey: A less popular term for a macro (see Macro).

HQ: Usually "high quality" (sometimes "head quarters" depending on the context). HQ items are similar to epic items in that they are seen as rare, high status, and valuable.

Hypers (hyper-resonance): A term for players who approach the game as themselves. Hypers believe in transparency of solid world statuses. Hyper-resonance is a reality in which players are authentic and discard fantasy narratives as well as flexibility of social categories.

Idk: "I don't know"

IGE: Still considered the leading parent company for RMT offering currency, leveling services, accounts and items for money: http://www.ige.com/

Imo: "In my opinion."

Imho: "In my honest opinion"

Inc: "Incoming" a term to announce to an audience that a mob or a group of mobs is coming to attack (or has aggroed).

Irl: "In real life"

Instance: An instance is a type of zone in the game that can be accessed by a certain group or by meeting a certain set of requirements. Instances are like virtual world "pockets" in which players can adventure or experience parts of the game as removed from the actual game world (for example, players may enter an instance for a dungeon like the "Deadmines" and that version of Deadmines is only accessible to those players, other instances or versions of the Deadmines exist for other groups, but in this way the entire population of characters on a particular server will never access the same Deadmines instance).

Inventory: The space a character has for carrying goods, items, and equipment. Drops and rewards are sorted or "fall" into a character's inventory to be sold, discarded, or remain for future use.

Invite: A game function that allows a player to add another player to a group, party, or guild ("Send an invite").

J/k: "Just kidding."

Journal: Usually some form of game log that records a character's travels, quests, accomplishments and so forth. Journals and other functions similar to them allow players to remember what they were doing in the game or perhaps guides them to their next adventure or goal.

JP: "Japanese" or in most cases a reference to the regional location of a player in the solid world.

JSE: "Job specific equipment" usually high quality and high status gear.

Kite or Kiting: A battle strategy or role that usually involves luring or dragging a mob around like a kite (as the mobs gives chase to a tank). In *FFXI*, a mob may have been debuffed using Gravity (a spell that slows movement speed) and Provoked (a skill that increases enmity) by tank class. As the mob gives chase, other players could focus on other mobs or they could damage the kited mob (strategies and reasoning varies by game). Usually, mobs are kited because they pose some danger if they are too close (a powerful close-range attack) or should not stand in place (a powerful defense bolstered from remaining still).

Leader: Parties and guilds generally have leaders who have more game function controls in respect to the group they are leading (ability to invite other players, oust them, begin quests, promote members, and so on).

Leet or Leetness: Variant of "elite." Leet players can be those of a particular guild, reputation, or that possess coveted items. The label can be self-proclaimed as much as achieved.

Level: A numerical marker of an avatar's power or progress in the game ("Level 80 Samurai").

Level-cap: See Cap.

Level-up: A numerical milestone in gaining XP. One of the goals of MMORPGS is to level-up and increase a character's power, attributes, skills and so forth. When so much XP has been accumulated a character "levels-up" and this process continues until a character reaches cap.

LFG or LFP: "Looking for group" or "Looking for party" an acronym players who are seeking group play shout to express their interest.

LFM: "Looking for more" or "Looking for members" usually this is used when a party is under construction and the members of the party are trying to fill-up remaining spaces or find players willing to serve in particular roles.

Link: Similar to an add. Some mobs having behavioral programs that force them to link (which is best described as attack in a group). So, even if players attempt to pull a single mob, the rest will link and aggro as well.

Linkshell (LS): The name of guilds in *FFXI* and *FFXIV*.

Lmao: "Laughing my ass off."

Lodestone: Similar to *WoW*'s Armory in that characters in *FFXIV* are searchable on Lodestone. Provides searchers information about characters such as their recent accomplishments, ranks of their jobs, and so forth.

Log: Sometimes the act of logging and quitting play until the next log in or may refer to the chat log and the text within ("How much dmg did that do? Check the log").

Logging: Usually refers to logging in and out of the game world. Occasionally means the act of logging (a gathering activity) where a player is out collecting wood and so forth.

Lol: "Laugh out loud."

Loot: A flexible term similar to drops, basically a reward or the "stuff" a mob possesses or a treasure chest contains.

Machinima: A fan-made video using video recording (e.g., fraps) of game play (or game models of characters) to create a narrative, song, or tutorial (Machinima can be humorous, educational, etc.).

Main: Usually a reference to the character a player has dedicated the most time to or considers a "primary" avatar. Sometimes main can also mean primary class or role in multi-class games ("Is Warrior your main?").

Maintenance: MMORPGs are often routinely fixed or patched for technical reasons (glitches) or additional of content (adding quests, items, etc.). When maintenance is being performed on the game, the servers are usually unavailable, which means no players can play until the maintenance is completed.

Macro: A term for hotkey where players can assign certain tasks to a key to streamline game play. Usually players do this for battle reasons (assigning a single button a number of skills to reduce scrolling and clicking). Macros can be coupled with text and report information to other players ("Using Provoke! HP: 90%"). Players also create macros for emotes, coupling gestures with text for unique expressions.

Mana or MP: Similar to health or HP, but represents the pool or points available for the use of magic (spells have MP costs). MP can be recovered in various ways.

Map (mini-map): The visual representation of the game world. Some maps are nested within other maps (for example, a town map or zone map that is part of a larger area or zone). The mini-map is an icon on the UI that helps players navigate the virtual world and usually highlights the direction the character is facing, some landmarks the characters is near, as well as other NPCs and PCs located nearby.

Mats: "Materials" or the items required to create or craft other items ("The mats are 2 silver nuggets to make a silver ring").

Med: Usually a "break" or quick rest for a party or group to allow characters to recover health, mana, or discuss strategy.

Melee: Reference to jobs or roles that are primarily dedicated to dealing physical damage.

Min-Maxing: A game play strategy that players use to allow the greatest output from a character, skill, etc. Min-maxing is less about customization ("I like to play this way so I chose X") and more about ensuring the best "build" for a character ("How do I make my character the best possible?"). Some approaches to play in very elite circles require players min-max their characters to be included.

Mission: Another term for quest.

Mistell: The act of broadcasting text to an unintended audience. Players might intend to speak to the guild, but instead speak to their party. Examples vary.

MMORPG (MMO): Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game.

Mob: The generic term of any killable creature, monsters, humanoid, or enemy in the game.

Mod: "Modification" some programs (like add-ons) that augment the game (change the UI, etc.).

Mono-class game: In MMORPGs such as *WoW*, each character created can only choose one class. Thus, if a player desires to play more classes, more characters must be created (usually called "alts").

Mount: A term for a mode of travel where characters can mount animals, machines and so on to hasten travel times and avoid/outrun hostile mobs.

MT: "Mistell" or sometimes "Mistype" the habitual response following the transmission of any text in the game to an unintended audience.

MUD: "Multi-used Dungeon" regarded somewhat as the predecessors of MMORPGs.

Mule: An "extra" character created for menial tasks such as holding additional inventory, bazaaring, etc.

Multiboxing: Some MMORPGs can be run in "windowed mode" which is basically less than full-screen size and allows players to navigate websites or other activities. Multiboxing can refer to either playing the game with two accounts on different platforms (and thus watching two "boxes" or screens) or can refer to having multiple windows open (the game plus a wiki, or media player, etc.) and therefore, multitasking different tech.

Multi-class game: MMORPGs which a single character can access or become any class available in the game (alts are far less common because one character can do everything)

NA: "North American" or in most cases a reference to the regional location of a player in the

solid world.

Nerdrage: A pejorative term for angry reactions (broadly defined) by gamers. Players can "nerdrage" about many things (dcing, drop rate, patches).

Nerf: When a class or skill or some element in the game is perceived to be too powerful, a patch or update may "nerf" that element (for example, Rangers were a class in *FFXI* of explosive popularity because they were incredibly powerful DDs, however, a patch nerfed them by recalculating their damage output among other things, and many players quit or changed jobs).

Newbie: Term for a new player, sometimes self-proclaimed.

Ni Hao: A Mandarin greeting or "hello." However, English speaking players usually send a tell with "Ni Hao" to a character they suspect to be a goldfarmer as a way of baiting the player into speaking Mandarin. Because of the stereotype of the "Chinese goldfarmer" any response to Ni Hao in Mandarin only cements players accusations.

Ninja: A class in *FFXI*. However, "ninjas" are more commonly players who "steal" loot from a group that they were not allowed to claim. Because groups usually operate on some rule system about who receives what loot during a raid or instance, players who operate outside that agreement are "ninja looters." Ninja looting is seen as poor form and can damage a players reputation severely.

NM: "Notorious monster" or "Named mob" basically a "rare" or special mob in the game that likely drops rare loot. NMs are often camped heavily for this reason.

Noob or nub: More pejorative terms for newbie, but the meaning and sharpness of all three terms seems to vary considerably.

NPC: "Non-player character" or any character in the game that is not controlled by an actual player, but instead by the game itself.

Nuke: A term for casting damage spells.

One-shotted: Having one's HP depleted in one-shot or doing the same to a mob (a one-hit kill). Sometimes players may explain to others the powerfulness of their character by discussing what mobs they can one-shot.

Omfg: "Oh my fucking god."

Omg: "Oh my god."

Omw: "On my way."

OP: "Over-powered" can refer to a skill or a class in the game that is regarded as too powerful

by the player base. Sometimes, citing game balance, OP elements may be nerfed in patches and updates.

Party: See PT.

Pass: A game function that allows a player to "pass" on loot or drops (ideally, allowing other players in the party to have a better chance to receive the item).

Pat: "Patrol" in *WoW* notes mobs that roam certain areas or instances and must be accounted for in group strategy lest the pat aggro the party while engaged with other mobs.

Patch: Term for content and elements of the game that are added or augmented. Patches can have significant effects on the game, how it is played, difficult of battling, and so on (for example, Patch 1.15a for *FFXIV* dramatically increased that amount of skill and XP rewarded to players, which made the game "easier" to level-up and progress through).

PC: "Player character" or the avatar controlled by a person/player. Sometimes "PC" refers to a computer that is not a Mac.

Persona: The essence of a character or avatar. Sometimes players discuss their avatars as having character, or personality. Occasionally, this is harnessed for RP purposes.

Pet: An additional body that can sometimes be controlled by the player. Some classes are "pet classes" where the character has some form of ally (an animal, zombie, demon, etc.) that can assist in battle. Sometimes pets are merely for aesthetics (a creature that follows the character but has no functionality).

PK: "Player kill" or the act of attempting to kill another PC. In some games there are areas that regulate this activity as an aspect of game play (battlegrounds in *WoW*) and PKing is normalized. However, PKing is more likely a reference to attempting to kill another PC by alternative means to disrupt, annoy, and so on. In these circumstances, players may train mobs on other players in an attempt to have the mobs kill the player. PKing in non-sanctioned ways is generally bad form and was usually deployed as means of antagonizing suspected goldfarmers.

Placeholder: A mob that pops in place of an NM. Placeholders are regular mobs that "occupy" an NM's place and must be routinely killed once a pop window had opened. If a placeholder is left alone, the NM will not pop until it has been killed.

Point System:(sometimes DPK or Dragon Kill Points) Guilds often establish rules for participation and claiming loot. Most guilds use some version of a point system which awards guild members for participating in battles, farming, etc. with "points." These points are depleted by asking for or receiving desired loot (for example, in *FFXI* a Kirin's Osode in one linkshell was worth 100 points, and players were awarded points for the time, usually in hours, they spent with the linkshell farming, killing gods, and so on).

Pop: The term for a mob "popping" or spawning into the game world, or into virtual existence as it were. Sometimes used to alert other players that a mob in the area is now there (or has reappeared: "Hey guys, goblin pop").

Pop Window: Mobs generally have a respawn timer and players can predict when NMs that have been killed are likely to pop. Using ToD and respawn timers players can reasonably guess when the pop window, that is, the time when the mob's pop is now possible, will "open." Players can then gather in the correct area and kill placeholders until the NM arrives.

Port: Usually in reference to an ability to teleport characters to other areas of the game world (instant movement across the virtual world).

PL: "Power level" a term for the various means for increasing the rate at which a character levels-up. RMT sites offer PL services (where someone plays a character and grinds to a certain level in a set time). High-level players may assist low level players in gaining XP (for example, healing them so they can fight more difficult mobs), or additional players may do something similar for a group. Anything the allows characters to level quicker than expected by normal means.

Proc: "Programmed random occurrence" or the likelihood which something happens in the game. This usually relates to a battle ability such as "Double Attack" which has a chance to happen while attacking the enemy. Players may seek items or equipment that increases proc of an ability.

PT: "Party" which refers to a group of players who gather with a specific goal (grinding, questing).

PuG: "Pick up group" usually a party of players who are more strangers than friends and gather to meet a specific goal or objective (popular term in *WoW*).

Pull or Puller: A role often granted to certain classes that involves "pulling" mobs to a group to be killed. Pulling requires a player draw a mob usually from a distance (using a ranged weapon or a spell) while also requiring the player survive the distance back to the group without being severely damaged or incapacitated.

PST: "Please send tell" or encouraging an interested player to send a private message to discuss something further (a trade, a party or guild invite, etc.).

PvE: "Player versus environment" or any form of game play where players fight computer-controlled mobs and so on.

PvP: "Player versus player" or game play that involves pitting PCs against one another (battlegrounds).

Pwn: A typo for "own" that became standard. Usually means to defeat, destroy, or overcome

someone, quest, mob, etc. ("I pwned the shit out of that hog").

QFT: "Quoted for truth" usually proceeds quoting another post on a forum and highlighting one's agreement with said post.

QQ: An emoticon that represents crying eyes. Usually a sarcastic quip to another player's compliant.

Quest: From the epic to the profane, quests are basically "stuff to do" in MMORPGs. Players are usually rewarded for completing quests in loot, currency, or in less tangible ways such as witnessing back stories, events, or gaining access to area in the game that what obstructed somehow before completion of the quest. Quests may involve epic battles and require large groups of skilled players, or could be a simple as clicking on a few glowing objects in the virtual environment.

Race: An option during character creation that allows the select of a multitude of different fantasy races (varies by game) such as elves, lalafells, lapin, humes, orcs, goblins and so on. In some games, races have specific abilities, skills, or stats that make them better or worse choices for particular classes (hardcore players invested in min-maxing may theorize over the "best race" for a certain class).

Raid: A flexible term for a group activity that may involve dungeons, instances, or PvP. A great deal of raiding is done by guilds, can sometimes be dictated by schedules, and is usually a part of end-game content. Raids vary by game.

Random: A function in *FFXI* that produced a random number and sometimes helped decide who received certain drops. It was also used as part of the Casino scams.

Rape: Used interchangeably with pwn. A posture of dominance or defeat ("I raped that quest") can also be self applied ("I don't want to run west, those mobs will rape me"). The term reinforces dominance through sexual violence even though there is no rape or sexual coercion involved the submission of a player or mob. However, the symbolism is notable.

Rare: Usually an item of high value. Sometimes players are limited to only being capable of possessing one of a rare item (which means if they were to find another they would not be able to place the second in their inventory).

Realm: Another term for server.

Recipe: Recipes are generally for crafting. In some games a recipe must be obtained before an item can be crafted, in others recipes for crafting may be posted on a wiki so players know what mats are required to make the desire items.

Refresh: A spell in *FFXI* which allowed MP of the target to regen.

Regen: "Regeneration" the recovery of HP or MP at some given rate.

Rep: "Reputation" usually referring to a game mechanic that calculates how popular or well known a character is with the NPCs, towns, and so on. Players sometimes grind rep with an area to access certain quests or rewards.

Repairs: In some games, equipment and items become damaged and must be repaired. This could cost money, or may require another player with a certain crafting skill to repair the damages items.

Repeatables: Usually the term for a quest that can be repeated and thus milked for rewards or rep.

Respec: Re-augmenting an avatar or re-distributing attributes in order to embody a new specialty.

Retard: A pejorative term for applied to players seen as newbies or as playing the game incorrectly.

Retired: A reflective term for MMORPG players who quit playing a game because they felt there was little left for them, they had no one to play with, or other reasons (I'm a 75 retired Paladin). Players may also retire a class or goal in the game they are currently playing ("My Archer is retired, focusing on my Gladiator now").

Reverb: A term used to explain players who approach the game as a fantasy world, but also acknowledge the importance of social categories. Reverbs are sometimes forced toward hyper-resonance (playing with voicechat), but do not always require other players to disclose their solid world statues.

Reward: Usually anything granted for the completion of a quest (money, gear, rep, XP).

Rez: A term for being resurrected or otherwise brought back from death (avoids the need for corpse runs or returning to a bind point). Usually healing classes are responsible in some way for raising avatars that fall during battle.

RMT: "Real money trade" or any activity which attempts to exchange virtual goods and services for real money.

Role: Term for the expectations of a particular class when participating in group play.

Roll: A verb used casually to describe choices made during character creation ("I rolled a Troll" or "You should roll a Paladin").

Run: A flexible term for certain group activities. "Doing a run" for X is more or less a declaration of intent to participate in some group play ("Doing dungeon runs" or "Doing coffer

key runs" etc.).

Salvage: In *FFXI*, a type of instance that was prime end game content, which involved very difficult mobs and rare rewards.

Say: A level of text chat that is semi-public in that avatars within a certain proximity of the one typing in say chat can read the text.

Screenshot: A game function which allows players to capture a screenshot (a picture) of the game and save it (which could be posted on forums, blogs, etc.).

Seeking: A function in *FFXI* that allowed players to LFP without having to shout or advertise they were doing so. A special icon was placed next to the avatar's name.

Server: Because of technical restrictions, MMORPGs are forced to divide the player base onto a number of game servers and thus there are sometimes many virtual worlds of the same game existing on different servers. Players may be in the same zone of the world, but if they are on different servers, they will not meet.

Shout: A level of text chat that is very public. Shouts are generally discouraged, but usually allow all avatars in a zone or within a great distance to read the text being shouted.

Skill Chain: In *FFXI,* players would execute certain abilities in a determined pattern in order to increase damage output. This required some strategy and players to work in tandem.

Skill-up: Similar to grinding. Basically, working on a specific skill ("Sword skill") so that it increases in proficiency.

SM: "Solid man" or a person who identified as a man in the solid world.

Solid World:“Solid world” refers to the world outside the game. This term eliminates the deployment of the word “real,” since the virtual world is just as “real” as the solid one. “Solid” was the term used by a guild I belonged to for six months.

Solo: Playing the game by oneself or accomplishing goals, questing, grinding by oneself. Games vary on the viability of solo play.

Sorting: Negotiating inventory space in some way (selling items, discarding items, moving them around or between a bank and a character's inventory, etc.).

Soulbound: In *WoW*, items that are soulbound are "stuck" in that character's inventory and cannot be traded or sold to other players (they can be discarded, or sometimes sold to NPCs).

Spam: Nonsense text or repeated text in a channel.

Spawn: Interchangeable with pop (see Pop).

Spec: A term for how a character has been augmented and in what skills a character specializes.

Stun (lock): A skill of several classes that nullifies attacks. Stun locking is a strategy of repeatedly using stunning skills to seize-up a mob or enemy.

Sub: In *FFXI*, characters combined jobs and thus had a main and a sub (for example, a Ninja/Warrior).

Subscription: The monthly fee owed to the game creators for continued access to an account and by extension, the game itself. Usually fees average fifteen dollars per month of play.

SW: "Solid woman" or a person who identified as a woman in the solid world.

SWG: "Star Wars Galaxies" a MMORPG.

Synth: A term for crafting popular in *FFXI* and *FFXIV*.

Tank: A class role that requires a player keep the attention of mobs and protect allies. Ideally, this role mitigates the damage to other members of the party and simplifies the healer role because tanks are primarily the characters taking damage and thus there are less targets to worry about keeping alive.

Tell: A private level of text that only the sender and recipient can see.

Time Sink: Usually an element in MMORPGs that seems to be little more than a waste of time. Although arguably most anything in MMORPGs can be a time sink, some are strategic in game design such as the time required to level a character from one to cap is justified as allowing a player to experience the full range of the game and learn how a class functions.

Title: Similar to achievements, titles are special text characters can earn through meeting in game goals (some can proceed avatar names while some are viewable by performing a check).

ToD: "Time of Death." In *FFXI*, highly coveted NMs, when killed, were then recorded by players as having died at a certain time. Knowing the ToD of an NM meant that a player could predict, from the mob's pop timer when the pop window would open and thus be able to gather enough players to attack the NM when it popped. ToDs were high priority and tightly kept secrets among LSs because rival LSs would often compete for NM kills.

Toon: Another term for avatar or character. It is sometimes offensive as it can be perceived as framing a character as unimportant or silly.

ToS: "Terms of Service" the extensive agreement players are required to adhere to in order to play the game. ToS are often presented every time the player logs into the game as a constant

reminder that certain behaviors are prohibited.

TP: "Tactical Points" in *FFXI* and *FFXIV* players gain TP by performing successful actions on a mob. Once enough TP is accrued, certain skills become available for the player to execute (e.g, damage abilities).

Trade: An option in most MMORPGs to allow characters to trade goods with each other. Usually opens a window where the goods can be placed and both characters can see the process. Trade systems employ safeguards to stop characters from stealing or being dishonest by forcing a number of inputs to ensure the items being traded are actually being traded.

Trail period: The amount of time that the game can be played for free before incurring subscription fees. Most games allow a 30 day trial period from the moment the game is registered until the first monthly payment is due.

Train: Dragging or aggroing mobs so that several may chase a character and "train" toward a zone or through an area. Training is often a tool for PKing since a character may drag hostile mobs toward unsuspecting PTs or characters and escape or possibly die, leaving the mobs to aggro those nearby.

Trolling: Attempting to bait players into an argument by making polemic statements such as shouting to an entire zone "This game fucking sux!" Trolls similarly exist on forums, posting in an attempt to get a rise out of the community.

Twink: Usually augmenting newbies or low level characters by giving them quality items that would be unavailable to them through normal play. Twinks in *WoW* were usually characters dedicated to PvP at lower levels.

Uber: Variant of super and similar in deployment to leet.

UI: "User Interface" the way the player sees and plays the game, the menus, icons, visual elements, widgets, chat log and so on.

Undercut: A term for "price cutting" in bazaars or AHs, offering to sell an item below the usual or average price.

Vent or Ventrilo: A common voicechat program the players use to chat in real time.

Virtual World: The world inside the game. Used interchangeably with "game world" or sometimes "synthetic world."

VM: "Virtual man" or a male avatar.

Voice chat: Programs that allow players to speak to each other in real time such as Ventrilo. Voice chat is often mandated for complicated group play (such as raids). Many players often

occupy a single channel and can all participate in the conversation or give directions during play.

VW: "Virtual woman" or a female avatar.

W/E: "Whatever" sometimes "Whenever"

WC: "Wash Closet" used in the same way as Bio.

Whisper: In *WoW*, a whisper is a private message like a Tell and can only be seen by the two characters exchanging the text.

Widget: A term for the elements of the UI that are usually customizable or movable. This may include the Chat Log, Mini-map and other on-screen information.

Wiki: Used as a general term for a database related to the game ("Dunno what to do on this mission, gonna check the wiki"). Wikis are commonly built by the player base to assist in the completion of game goals, deepen understanding of game lore, or provide information otherwise unavailable in the game itself. *FFXI* and *FFXIV* players heavily rely on wikis because the game creator provide player with very little instruction or information.

Wipe: The term used when everyone in a group or party has died. Players may wipe intentionally if a battle is somehow beyond their capability or an element of their strategy has been disrupted (for example, the healer dies and chances of victory are slim). Players may accidently cause a wipe by aggroing mobs or failing to adhere to a specific battle strategy.

Woot: An expression of enthusiasm often used to note in game success ("Woot! Vintage Robe!")

World: Another term for server.

World Resonance: A term used to describe the "slippage" between worlds or the overlap in information between the solid and virtual. Three "forms," "approaches," or "degrees" of world resonance are discussed: hypers, damps, and reverbs.

WoW: "World of Warcraft" which to date the most successful MMORPG.

WTB: "Want to buy" an acronym shouted by players to zones or in channels coupled with the item they are seeking ("WTB Iron Nuggets!")

Wtf: "What the fuck."

Wth: "What the hell."

WTS: "Want to sell."

WTT: "Want to trade."

Www: Similar to "lol" or "lmao," often used by Japanese players.

XP: Short for "Experiences points" in some games or in conversation (although occasionally it may refer to the Microsoft operating system in the correct context).

XPac: An additional product that players are encouraged to purchase and install allowing them to access new and expanded game content.

Zerg: A simple-minded strategy that requires little more than a bum rush toward the mob(s) ("Just zerg the boss and we should be fine").

ZOMG: A spin on "Oh my god" which expresses disbelief, surprise, and dissatisfaction.

Zone: As a noun, it is a space (or area) in the game world separated by invisible boundaries that, once moved through, bring players to a different zone. As a verb, "zoning" describes the movement into or out of a zone. Zones are similar to pieces of a puzzle pushed together to create the world (although the experience of "zoning" is different by game). In *WoW*, the world is regarded as being largely zone-free although chat logs and channels change as a character moves through geographical zones. However, in *FFXI* characters can leave "Rolandberry Fields" and zone into "Lower Jeuno" and the graphical space and text logs are isolated within each, moving between them grants or denies access to the text that occurs within them.